

**COWBOY POLITICS: THE CHANGING FRONTIER MYTH AND  
PRESIDENCIES OF THEODORE ROOSEVELT, LYNDON JOHNSON,  
RONALD REAGAN AND GEORGE W. BUSH**

A Dissertation Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies and  
Research in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in the Interdisciplinary Studies Graduate Program

UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN  
SASKATOON

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## **ABSTRACT**

This is the first in-depth and comprehensive study of the deployment of the Frontier Myth by US presidents. It explores how and why this quintessential American vision has been adapted and transformed to advance radically different political agendas.

The dissertation incorporates key elements from the disciplines of history, literature and anthropology. It explores the relationship between presidential politics, history, literature, and popular culture in representing the frontier and the textual, verbal and visual representations that have been deployed to depict the significance of the westering, frontier experience in relation to the four presidents. The study relies on a broad range of primary and secondary resources from several research institutions including three presidential libraries.

My research reveals that major events in American and world history have caused the emphases of the myth of the “Old West” frontier to be reshaped, at times abruptly, so that presidents of different eras could attempt to harness this Western symbolism in promoting their remarkably wide-ranging ideologies and doctrines. The first of the “frontier” Presidents, Theodore Roosevelt, vigorously pursued an active federal government and helped directly establish a forward looking Frontier Myth that today would be considered on the left. A series of tragic events during the Lyndon Johnson through Jimmy Carter presidencies (1965-1980), however, including the American quagmire in Vietnam, race riots, economic stagflation, and other crises both at home and abroad, broke up the consensus of a liberal, progressive Frontier Myth that no longer appeared to match the historic experience. These events caused the entire structure and popular representations of American frontier symbols and images to shift political direction from the left to the right, from liberalism to conservatism—a profound change that has had dramatic implications for the history of American thought and presidential politics.

The popular idea today that frontier American leaders and politicians are naturally Republicans with conservative ideals flows directly from the Reagan era. Looking forward, the nature of the resilient Frontier Myth could once again be entering a watershed period as it did during the 1960s: its message in the realm of presidential

politics depends on the shape and influence of national and world events that will occur in the years and decades to come.



## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

When one is an academic librarian with a nuclear family and working on a PhD program for seven years there are many people to thank.

My family has shared this experience with me every day since the journey began. I will always be grateful to my wife of 25 years, Yumiko, and our teenage daughters Emily and Rachel (who is now twice the age she was when I started) for their amazing encouragement, patience and endurance. Special thanks to my brother, Paul Smith, for sparking my interest in both history and Westerns at an early age.

Much of the credit for anything worthwhile in this dissertation and none of the blame for its faults go to my gifted supervisor, Professor Keith Carlson, who provided numerous key foundational ideas and insights, kept me on track, and offered his extensive knowledge generously from day one. He is the best “Frontier Presidents” dissertation supervisor a graduate student could hope to have. My thanks also goes to Gary Zellar, for his enthusiasm, support and knowledge of character studies, and important guidance and contributions to earlier drafts of this dissertation. My committee members were all a great pleasure to work with: Bill Bartley and Lindsey Banco shared their literary and cinematic knowledge through both course work and key revisions to this study; and Natalia Khanenko-Friesen brought her important anthropological perspective to this interdisciplinary endeavour. Thanks also to my enthusiastic and courageous chair, Richard Julian, and to the folks in the Interdisciplinary Studies department and Graduate Studies who have been incredibly supportive in achieving this goal.

I met some outstanding archivists and librarians who went the extra mile to help me track down many resources and contacts vital to this project. The LBJ Library in Austin is a model institution and I have many people to thank for my two weeks research experience there including subject archivists Allen Fisher, Liza Talbot, Barbara Cline and John Wilson, Margaret Harman in A/V collections, registrar Michael MacDonald, along with reference archivists Lara Hall, Brian McNerney, Scott Seely and Will Clements. My special thanks to Sharon Kilzer, Project Manager of the Theodore Roosevelt Center at Dickinson State University, and staff who were simply amazing in providing a plethora of TR resources all brought together in one location (just down the

road from Saskatchewan). I cannot thank you enough. The staff of the Ronald Reagan Library in Simi Valley, California, provided advice and access to some especially fascinating audio visual and campaign materials. And thanks also to the curator of collections, Marilyn Fisher, for the in-depth tour of the Reagan Ranch Center in Santa Barbara.

I must mention two amazing mentors from my six years as an undergraduate and Master's student at the University of Victoria. Ted Wooley, an inspiring professor, MA supervisor, and friend. You are very much missed. And Brian Dippie who set out much of the intellectual foundation for this dissertation. Brian was the perfect 8:30 am professor with his unforgettable courses on the American West and Intellectual History ("Mr. Smith, are you awake? I have a question for you.").

Key financial support for this dissertation came from the Moody Research Grant, Lyndon Baines Johnson Foundation, the White House Historical Association Research Grant, the University of Saskatchewan sabbatical grant, and the University of Saskatchewan Library.

Thanks also to the University of Saskatchewan Library for its strong relief support at key stages in the PhD program. My incredibly supportive and wonderful colleagues in the Murray Library: Diana Kichuk, Deborah Lee, and Susan McConkey kept my eyes on the prize and were always there when I needed help. Retired head of the law library and friend Ken Whiteway gets the blame for suggesting that I take on the PhD program in the first place. And finally my special thanks to another friend, humanities librarian extraordinaire Donna Canevari de Paredes, whose encouragement and constant support enabled me to reach the finish line.

## **DEDICATION**

To my parents Jack and Doreen Smith, the best two people I know.

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## Introduction

Human beings make myths, tell stories about ancient times and great events, and call such times and events to mind over many generations, for all sorts of reasons. But many of these reasons are political.

--Philosopher Robert B. Pippin, 2010<sup>1</sup>

### The Frontier Myth

Few would deny that the Frontier Myth as it relates to American society, character and politics has so effectively captured Americans' imagination that it has deeply woven into the nation's consciousness and psyche. What is less well appreciated is the way the Frontier Myth has changed over time in response to historical events and processes, and how, in turn, events and procedures have come to be understood through the lens of frontierism. The 1890s decade was the era which first codified the "frontier thesis" of American history when it was cogently and persuasively argued that Americans had evolved a unique and superior civilization due to the impact of the frontier experience.

Historian Frederick Jackson Turner's seminal essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893) contended that as American settlers moved westwards they did so across five "fall lines" which saw a "perennial rebirth"<sup>2</sup> of society in each new region. There, on the frontier, occurred a social evolution from the primitive savage to the advanced urban society. Turner measured this process by the recurring

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<sup>1</sup> Robert J. Pippin, *Hollywood Western and American Myth: The Importance of Howard Hawks and John Ford for Political Philosophy* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2010): 61.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick J. Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association* (1894): 200, on *Empire Online* database (accessed 25 March 2012).



appearance of the same occupational types in a set order: traders, ranchers, pioneer farmers, intensive farmers, and finally the urban occupations. At each new “meeting point between savagery and civilization,”<sup>3</sup> civilized Easterners were supposedly reduced to a more primitive state and then forced to reorient themselves. Therefore, the further West one went the more exceptionally “American” they would become as they moved farther away from the influences of Europe and toward the creation of a unique nation. One needed to look primarily to the West (the *real* America), then, not only to understand the development of that region but that of the rest of the nation as a well.

According to the most frequently singled out passage of Turner’s thesis,<sup>4</sup> the existence of a rugged frontier and 400 years of Americans being in contact with it had created a new breed of person and a new type of culture. Turner asserted:

To the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and acquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier.

While Turner also detected in the Western communities a growth of excessive individualism and weakening of a civic spirit he simultaneously built up the frontiersman as epitomizing the egalitarian democrat who rises against the corrupting and phony complexity of Eastern (i.e. excessively European) institutions. This “abundance of free land” had accounted for the American character and democracy and

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Reviewers of Turner’s thesis (including historian Carl Becker) and its commercial promoters quoted these 86 words of Turner’s thesis much more than any other segment. See Ronald H. Carpenter, “Frederick Jackson Turner and the Rhetorical Impact of the Frontier Thesis,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 63 (April 1977): 123.

now that the frontier was closed off (as made “official” in an announcement by the census bureau in 1891), the consequences for the nation’s future remained uncertain.<sup>5</sup>

In the twentieth century, many observers pointed out that Turner’s thesis excluded women, visible minorities, and non-English speakers. Native Americans were useful for marking the current frontier line and helped bring out frontier traits in white Americans who encountered them but, otherwise, were obstacles to be pushed out of the way of advancing civilization. “Women,” writes historian Brian W. Dippie, “apparently stayed in the East until the land was tidied up and made presentable.”<sup>6</sup> And African-Americans, Hispanics and Asians were invisible. Regardless, Turner’s thesis was widely accepted and highly influential.

Similar characteristics had earlier been attributed to Western frontiersmen and hunters in Theodore Roosevelt’s *The Winning of the West* series published from 1885 to 1894. The future President praised the pioneering Westerner’s rugged individualism “tempered by sound common sense.” By contrast, while TR respected American Indians for their warrior prowess, they clearly represented the forces of evil and obstruction, preying on newly arrived settlers: the anti-progressive principle of the few who stood in the way of many. Going against such evil demanded great courage, and those (white Protestant) Americans who possessed that courage were well on their way to heroic status. Roosevelt like Turner was deeply nostalgic of the frontier past and his works express some apprehension about the future; but there was also an optimistic bent to Roosevelt’s writings not seen in Turner’s thesis and an apparent determination to see the progressive-frontier dynamic carried forward into the twentieth century. In Britain,

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<sup>5</sup> Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier,” 226-227.

<sup>6</sup> Brian W. Dippie, “The Winning of the West Reconsidered,” *Wilson Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Summer 1990): 81.

following the Boer War, Robert Baden-Powell would conceive of the Boy Scout movement as a cure for the allegedly vanishing virtues of loyalty, morality, rugged individualism and self-sacrifice said to have been undermined in an increasingly modern, industrial age.<sup>7</sup> Likewise in many respects, Roosevelt became a key figure in the “Cult of the Wild,” believing that contact with (and relatedly, protection of) the wilderness would help the country rid itself of “flabbiness” and “slothful ease.” For Turner, Roosevelt and like-minded protagonists abroad, the significance of the frontier was simply enormous: to understand American history one had to understand Western history.

The frontier and its disappearance is America’s most powerful and persistent myth. Definitions of the term “myth” itself are diverse. Mircea Eliade, in her classic work, *Myth and Reality*, tells us that it would be very difficult to come up with a definition of myth which would be acceptable to all scholars. She does offer some guideposts, however. In her description of the structure and function of myths, Eliade writes that “myth is always related to a ‘creation,’ it tells how something came into existence, or how a pattern of behavior, an institution, a manner of working were established; this is why myths constitute the paradigms for all significant human acts.”<sup>8</sup> She adds “that in one way or another one ‘lives’ the myth, in the sense that one is seized by the sacred, exalting power of the events recollected or re-enacted.”<sup>9</sup> In terms of rhetoric, communications scholar Janice Hocker Rushing contends that the term refers to “a society’s collectivity of persistent values, handed down from generation to generation, that help to make the

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<sup>7</sup> Timothy Parsons, “Een Gonyama Gonyama!: Zulu Origins of the Boy Scout Movement and the Africanisation of Imperial Britain,” *Parliamentary History*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (March 2008): 61-62, 64; Saul Scheidlinger, “A Comparative Study of the Boy Scout Movement in Different National and Social Groups,” *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 13, No. 6 (December 1948): 749-750.

<sup>8</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963): 18.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid* 19.

world understandable, support the social order, and educate the society's young. Myths...are widely taught and believed. They are expressed in the dominant symbols and rituals of culture.”<sup>10</sup> Myth and religion scholar Joseph Campbell likewise asserts that “myths offer life models.” He also points out that these models change over time, that “The models have to be appropriate to the time in which you are living.” As Campbell put it in a conversation with journalist (and former LBJ Press Secretary) Bill Moyers “You can’t predict what a myth is going to be any more than you can predict what you’re going to dream tonight”<sup>11</sup>: a matter we shall return to at the close of this study.

With their focus on the frontier experience, Turner, Roosevelt and similar minded writers struck a responsive chord with the nation at the outset of the twentieth century which, in a sense, facilitated the shift of the American West from a geographic space to a place of the mind (a frontier, an idea, a mythic country).<sup>12</sup> It became a stridently national myth, not a regional one. Speaking of film and novels, G. Edward White was the first scholar to observe that: “We do not have ‘Easterns’ or ‘Southerners’—which *would* be sectional. We have Westerns—since America was, at the outset, *all* frontier.”<sup>13</sup> From the outset, the frontier idea held great appeal for the American people because it provided a usable history for a public becoming increasingly conscious of its role as a world power

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<sup>10</sup> Janice Hocker Rushing, “The Rhetoric of the Western Myth,” “The Rhetoric of the American Western Myth.” *Communication Monographs*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (March 1983): 15 (FN #6).

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988): 13; and see “Myths-Dreams-Symbols” online quotations from *The Power of Myth* with Bill Moyers at <http://mythsdreamssymbols.com/functionsofmyth.html> (accessed 27 April 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Walter P. Webb (and others) alternatively saw the West as a distinct geographic region defined by aridity and replete with heroes overcoming environmental obstacles. As vice president, Lyndon Johnson appointed Webb as the premier historian of the land beyond the 98<sup>th</sup> meridian.

<sup>13</sup> Gary Wills, *John Wayne's America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997): 14; see also G. Edward White, *The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968): 1.

and “equally self-conscious about the [historical] brevity of their national identity.”<sup>14</sup> The frontier past provided for an American past as impressive and magnificent as those of any European power, an American landscape as impressive as any, anywhere in the world, and heroes and myths that fully matched those in the Old World. Many were, in fact, the same old myths transposed. The Frontier Myth gave credence to a fundamental tenet in America’s national mythology, American *exceptionalism*, and its accompanying sense of mission. Turner defined American exceptionalism as synonymous with democracy and linked it for all time with the West. In the place where “the wilderness masters the colonist” the “outcome is not Old Europe...here is a new product that is American.”<sup>15</sup> And out of this mystical process allegedly grew the American brand of egalitarian democracy and the molding of the American character. As Charles A. Beard later declared, Turner’s essay on the frontier had “a more profound influence on thought about American history than any other essay or volume ever written on the subject.”<sup>16</sup> It is a frontier image that became too much of the national ethos to go away.

In terms of historical accuracy, the alleged demise of the frontier resulted in an over-stimulated imagination. Frederick Jackson Turner’s “Significance of the Frontier” essay contains numerous and substantive historical errors, as have been exposed by many scholars from Earl S. Pomeroy to Gerald D. Nash to Richard White. These include, among others, Turner’s a) “orderly” movement Westward (the Californian West Coast was, in reality, settled before the interior); b) “radical” politics (westerners often could not vote and were typically conservative as opposed to being democratic innovators); c)

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<sup>14</sup> Martin Ridge, “The Life of an Idea: The Significance of Frederick Jackson Turner’s Frontier Thesis,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Winter 1991): 12.

<sup>15</sup> Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier,” 201.

<sup>16</sup> Charles A. Beard quoted in Richard Hofstadter, “Turner and the Frontier Myth,” *The American Scholar*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Autumn 1949): 433.

distinctive culture (many settlers were “desperately imitative” of the East); d) liberal economics (cowboys as employees reliant on eastern capital and the role of government-funded projects rather than rugged individualists); e) the West as a region composed of Anglo-Saxon males (Native Americans and women were there too and an estimated one third of cowboys were either black or Mexican<sup>17</sup>); f) and his depiction of American civilization as superior and benevolent to those of the conquered (New West historians point out that the “advancement” more resembled an “invasion” and brought exploitation and abuse of Native Americans and environmental destruction to the landscape).<sup>18</sup> But Turner’s arguments expressed what so many Americans wanted to believe, and what served their self-interest to believe to be true, that regardless of whether he got his facts right his overall arguments were widely considered *bona fide* and correct. This enthusiastic acceptance was also due to the fact that where Turner fell short as an historian he succeeded powerfully as a mythmaker and because many of the ideas found in his thesis had been “out there” for a long while. In fact, as Richard Slotkin has pointed out, many elements of the Turner thesis and of Theodore Roosevelt’s *Winning of the West* promoted ideas about the frontier that dated back to the colonial period (and had, in part, been transplanted from Europe). This includes the beliefs that westward pioneering: was a) part of a national mission—or what would become known in the nineteenth century as a “Manifest Destiny”; b) created settlements out West as a

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<sup>17</sup> In late nineteenth-century Texas, the estimated figure of black and Hispanic cowboys is 37%. See Sara R. Massey, *Black Cowboys of Texas* (College Station TX: Texas A & M University Press, 2000): xiii.

<sup>18</sup> The most compelling (and original) historical critique of the Turner thesis Earl H. Pomeroy, “Toward a Reorientation of Western History: Continuity and Environment” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (March 1955): 579-600. The best synthesis of the “New West” historians interpretation of Western history, which turned much of Turner and Roosevelt’s frontier arguments on their heads, is Richard White, *It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991. And historian Gerald D. Nash argues that the impetus for Turner’s thesis in 1893—that the frontier was “closed”—is false in and of itself. See Gerald D. Nash, “The Census of 1890 and the Closing of the Frontier,” *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, Vol. 71, No. 3 (July 1980): 98-100.

refuge from the tyranny and corruption of Europe or later Eastern America; c) provided a safety valve for the anxieties and problems of the cities; d) opened up a land of great wealth and opportunity (a “Golden West” as Earl Pomeroy phrased it) for enterprising individualists; and e) allowed the American nation to tap into an inexhaustible source of national wealth on which a future of “sky’s the limit” prosperity could be founded.<sup>19</sup>

Elliot West identifies another alluring element of the Frontier Myth. Since the earliest days of the Republic, West observes, Americans have been conflicted over their infatuation with *both* urban progress and a glorified rural past. They have reached forward for new ideas and improvements while at the same time making heroes out of those who lived rugged lives in a vanished age. For Alexis de Tocqueville, writing almost two centuries ago, the average American suffused over a rapidly changing world with a nostalgic drive to restore a vanished past; the American was, in a phrase proposed by historian Marvin Meyers, a “venturous conservative.”<sup>20</sup> The frontier/western myth has proven the perfect venue for displaying that conflict of interests and loyalties: the pull between old and new, nostalgia and progress that deepened in the twentieth century with its sweeping technological and social change and the promise (and fear) that new innovations would propel Americans forward away from the past; and Americans’ desire to harness those glorious, pastoral images and larger than life characters that made up their heroic “good old days.” All, Elliot West observes correctly, were an expression of America’s complicated and complex national character.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Richard Slotkin. *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992): 30.

<sup>20</sup> Marvin Meyer, *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957): 31.

<sup>21</sup> Elliott West, “Selling the Myth: Western Images in Advertising,” *Montana*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Summer 1996): 40.

The tensions between the demands for individualism versus needs of the community and of tolerance also remain strong throughout the history of Western Frontier Myth. Here was Turner's vital opposition in the old frontier, the meeting place between savagery and civilization. Jenni Calder has summed up the "basic paradox" of the American West:

On the one hand there is the instinct to preserve a heroic tradition that is aggressive, violent, and potentially anarchic. On the other there is the deliberate building up of solid community values, the relating of the developing territories of the West to the United States as a whole and the emphasis of those warm, homely qualities that have for so long flourished side by side with the cult of the violent loner.<sup>22</sup>

Turner argues that the two American qualities of tolerance and individualism are in perpetual conflict. The two greatest achievements of the frontier, the construction of a libertarian American individual and the creation of centralized Federal power are directly contradictory to one another.<sup>23</sup>

Ray Allen Billington contends that most Americans found that "the outstanding feature of the frontier thesis was optimism," which "satisfied the need of American for a rose-tinted view of the future."<sup>24</sup> After a Herculean struggle against the untamed wilds of the West (including, in the popular mind, "uncivilized" Indians and un-American domestic outlaws) the American people emerged triumphant and, according to the myth, proved themselves capable of dealing with any subsequent problem or challenge—even those centered in the crowded stresses of an industrialized, urban sprawl, or associated with international global politics.

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<sup>22</sup> Jenni Calder, *There Must Be a Lone Ranger* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1974): 205-206.

<sup>23</sup> This point is developed in Arthur Redding, "Frontier Mythologies: Savagery and Civilization in Frederick Jackson Turner and John Ford," *Literature Film Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (2007): 315.

<sup>24</sup> Billington quoted in Carpenter, "Frederick Jackson Turner," 124.



What earlier historians have identified as internal contradictions within the Frontier Myth that apparently were in need of reconciliation, this dissertation repositions as semiotic flexibility that created within the Frontier Myth an elasticity that allowed it to shift to accommodate changing political circumstances—even as it worked to shape those very circumstances. Keeping in mind these various facets and tensions, this dissertation will explore how the four presidents who most closely aligned themselves with the Frontier Myth and imagery of the Old West—Theodore Roosevelt, Lyndon B. Johnson, Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush—strategically, and at times unconsciously deployed frontier imagery to alternatively explain situations and on other occasions to make the complex appear simple. For, as with Turner’s original articulation of the frontier thesis, the cowboy presidents did not always need the facts behind their use of the frontier myth to be accurate, rather they needed the frontier myth to be persuasive. Interestingly, for most other nations the term “frontier” refers to a border between nations. But, in America, the twentieth and twenty-first century Cowboy Presidents have used the term very broadly to cover all areas of policy from the frontiers of space, to conservation, civil rights, education, the Cold War, gun ownership, national economy, and the “War on Terror.” Arguably, no other myth has embedded itself so deeply in American presidential politics. Importantly the myth’s application and emphases have shifted substantially at watershed periods in the nation’s history so that the turn of the century liberal TR’s use of frontier imagery and language would be different from that of postwar liberal LBJ’s, and each of these, in turn, would carry significantly different political messages than either the conservative Reagan or his would-be “cowboy” imitator George W. Bush.

In the history of presidential politics one finds that the emphasis on either the past or the future—that schizophrenic element of the frontier myth described by Elliot West—has varied significantly in accordance with the political stripe of individual Presidents and with events going on both in America and abroad. Roosevelt’s modern methods of engaging with fundamental economic and social change at the turn of century and Johnson’s proactive approaches to civil rights and social programs in the 1960s, both typically looked to a future of change and possibilities. By contrast, Reagan’s right wing prescriptions for economic stagflation and for confronting communism in the 1980s and Bush 43’s responses to 9/11 and a worsening economy two decades later drew deliberately on the imagery of a nostalgic past in the hope of recapturing it to, in the words of the Reagan ’80 Campaign sloganers’, “Make America Great Again.”

In this dissertation, the first in-depth and comprehensive study of the deployment of frontier myth by US presidents, I will explore how and why this quintessential American vision has worked to advance radically different political agendas. The evidence reveals that major events in United States and world history have caused the emphases of the frontier myth to be reshaped, at times abruptly, so that presidents of different eras could attempt to harness this “Western” symbolism in promoting their remarkably wide-ranging ideologies and doctrines, while at other times the interpretive power of the myth has blinded American presidents and the public to seeing national and international developments through anything other than glasses with frontier lenses.

## **Historiographical Rationale**

The Frontier/Old West Myth is not a “given.” Rather, it is a formalized way of thinking, revealed through both language and visual imagery that carries power. Taking part in the Frontier Myth in the guise of a Cowboy President sets up certain expectations for a President of himself, shapes his view of the United States and its role in the world, and influences the media and the public’s expectations of what the President will do and how he will act.

Brian W. Dippie’s insightful cultural history *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (1982) has direct methodological applicability to my own study of presidents and the frontier myth. Dippie demonstrates how the belief in the inevitable disappearance of Native Americans in the face of advancing American society and modernity was actually a myth, but so powerful a myth that it actually caused American politicians and policy administrators to create and implement policies from the late eighteenth through the mid-twentieth century that took the “vanishing American” as a fact. According to this myth, American Indians were a vanishing race who had been wasting away since the day that Europeans arrived, declining in strength and numbers until, one day not too far from now, no Native Americans would be left on earth. “The Vanishing American,” writes Dippie, “achieved the status of a cultural myth.” The decline of future native populations was broadly considered inevitable, and the myth “accounted for Indians future by denying them one, and stained the tissue of policy debate with fatalism.”<sup>25</sup> As the myth evolved, the government shifted from its segregationist philosophy of the 1830s to the assimilation philosophy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By 1938, however, the Commissioner of

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<sup>25</sup> Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1982): xii.

Indian Affairs was reporting that if Indians had been a vanishing race, such was no longer the case. And by the latter half of the twentieth century, Native American population numbers were increasing at a rate three times higher than the national average. This realization compelled the government to shift again—only this time to a philosophy of cultural relativism and self-determination during the New Deal era. Likewise, public attitudes toward the American Indian also had to mature once the old myth was, for most, put to rest.

Brian Dippie's analysis broke new ground by focusing on the ideological development of attitudes toward Indians: how individual actions and concepts made each change in federal policy acceptable to a particular generation and how the theory of the "Vanishing American" itself—which alternated from its theses of Indian decline and Indian revival—has been transformed. Prior to Dippie's insights many American historians tended to regard the myth of the vanishing American as a static perception that lacked tangible consequences. More important still, they regarded policy as somehow objectively independent of myth as though it was a product of rational responses to testable facts. But drawing on the approach of intellectual and cultural historians such as Rush Welter and Charles Rosenberg,<sup>26</sup> Dippie demonstrates how myths which people have held in the past can be extremely influential—depending upon who believes them and acts upon them. As Rush Welter succinctly phrased it, "ideas have consequences."<sup>27</sup> Studying the myth, then, is both useful as a reflection of popular

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<sup>26</sup> Rush Welter, "The Idea of Progress in America" (1955) reprinted in C.K. McFarland, *Readings in Intellectual History* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970): 284-294; Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962). Rosenberg's numerous and highly influential publications convincingly demonstrated the interdependence of medical and cultural history by situating medical developments within their cultural context and exploring connections between ideas and institutions.

<sup>27</sup> Welter, "The Idea of Progress in America," 288.

societal attitudes, and as actual *shapers* of attitudes and policies as well and, as such, is key to our understanding of American history.

Taking a similar approach to *The Vanishing American*, this dissertation explores the myth of the frontier in American thinking (including that of the four Presidents), the shape of which has been transformed by events and individuals and shifted from a thesis of liberalism and inclusion to one of conservatism and exclusion. As with Dippie's study, this examination of the frontier myth endeavours to cast well known thoughts from the late nineteenth through early twenty-first centuries in a new light: to demonstrate that these ideas about the Western frontier experience had major consequences for the attitudes, policies and decisions made by four US Presidents who each, arguably, held office during watershed periods in American history. In taking this approach, it is hoped that my dissertation will spur further research and discussion concerning the origins, acceptance and implications of the idea of the frontier for understanding the nature of Presidential politics and policymaking.

Along with the influence of historian Brian Dippie, the ideas of anthropologist Marshall Sahlins' have also had a substantive influence on this study of the changing frontier myth and the four presidencies. Americans have long chosen to draw on the frontier for their mythic identity. But as was the case with visions of the "Vanishing American," all social structures, including those associated with myths and ideologies have eventually faced crises so disruptive that these events cannot be fully explained by invoking or relying on the wisdom embodied in within them. If the symbolism of the frontier matched the historic experience closely enough, the applicability of the symbolism would be confirmed and even strengthened; but if the two do not fit and no match is made, the culture will either be forced to deny the importance of the event(s)

themselves or to change and revise the myth—or at very least its emphasis. Sahlins offers what is perhaps the clearest description of this process in his work, *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities*, where he writes:

People act upon circumstances according to their own cultural presuppositions, the socially given categories of persons and things....In general [however] the worldly circumstances of human action are under no inevitable obligation to conform to [these] categories....In the event they do not, the received categories are potentially revalued in practice, functionally redefined. According to the place of the received category in the cultural system as constituted, and the interests that have been affected, the system itself is more or less altered. At the extreme, what began as reproduction ends as transformation.<sup>28</sup>

Sahlins provides a specific example of this relationship between structure and event in the “Structure and History” chapter of his work, *Islands of History*. Here Sahlins discusses the transformation of Hawaiian culture that resulted from encounters between the island chain’s Indigenous peoples and Captain James Cook and his crew during the late eighteenth century. European contact gave rise to tensions between Hawaiian chiefs and people who had not been anticipated in the traditional relations between the latter two groups. As a result, the Hawaiian chiefs and common peoples’ relationship changed and the structure of their traditional categories was transformed. “In a certain anthropology, also notoriously in the study of history,” writes Sahlins, “we isolate some changes as strikingly distinctive and call them ‘events,’ in opposition to ‘structure’.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Marshall Sahlins, *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981): 67.

<sup>29</sup> Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985): 153.

Examining this event-structure relationship metaphorically, historian Keith Carlson explains that Sahlins' views structure as resembling "a river that flows and carries things along in a predictable way." Carlson adds:

Small events are like small rocks that the river simply sweeps over undisturbed. The structure subsumes, explains and is undisturbed by these events. Genuinely historical events are like landslides that divert the channel of water into new pathways. They disrupt the structure and cause it to take new forms, but not entirely new forms. It is still the same river. But Sahlins asks us to examine not only how events effect structure, but how structure shapes events. The two are mutually informing. So the landslide is shaped by the flowing river. The river and islands cannot escape their relationship, without the river the islands are not islands, without the islands the river flows in other directions.<sup>30</sup>

In a broad sense, our understanding of the functioning of history has changed as a result of Sahlins' insights and arguments. His views have challenged structuralists who saw myths and narrative expressions of structure as largely atemporal, and historians—especially those focusing on events and of biography—who seemed, on the other hand, unconcerned with the underlying structures of American society.

If, as John Mack Faragher points out, Turner's thesis is *the* most influential piece of writing in the history of American history,<sup>31</sup> then Dippie's study of the power of the Vanishing American myth and combined with Sahlins' insights concerning the interplay of structure and event provide a historiographical framework for understanding the role of the frontier myth in American presidential politics and history. Sahlins' anthropologically grounded work on the event-structure relationship shows us that social/cultural structures are powerful because they have the ability to explain and

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<sup>30</sup> Quotation from Carlson in email correspondence from Keith T. Carlson to David A. Smith, October 11, 2012.

<sup>31</sup> John Mack Faragher, *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History' and Other Essays* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1994): 1.

accommodate almost everything that occurs within society. Occasionally, however, an event or series of events occurs that is so profound that the structure cannot subsume it, and so the overall emphases of the structure or the structure itself changes (typically these events emerge from outside the society). Similarly the Frontier Myth creates a structure within which American society and history (past and future) is not only understood but within which it is lived. Though the 1890 census was an event which Frederick Jackson Turner stated had brought an end to the American frontier experience, the idea of the frontier as defining American society had become deeply entrenched in American thought. The myth outlasted the experience itself and explained how much of American society saw the world.

American literature shows that the ideas of the frontier myth have become such a key underlying structure of American society that it formed a major part of the nation's culture and self-identity. This dissertation contends that from the presidential administrations of Theodore Roosevelt through Lyndon Johnson, the frontier myth was interpreted and deployed primarily as a forward-looking phenomenon that celebrated inclusiveness, federal government programs and intervention. TR lived out and, as president, applied aspects of the myth to bring significant reforms to the American political system in an effort to bring modernity to the federal government and a balance of power to American society in an age of tremendous industrial and corporate growth. Six decades later, Lyndon Johnson tapped into the postwar version of the frontier myth to explain his "guns *and* butter" approach of prosecuting a land war against a Soviet proxy state in Asia while pursuing his liberal Great Society and War on Poverty reforms at home. But a succession of shocking events beginning with the failure to obtain victory in the conflict in Vietnam, and the shocking race riots and assassinations of the late



1960s, caused Americans to seriously question the version of the frontier myth that had provided an adequate narrative for Lyndon Johnson's programs and policies both at home and abroad. These startling setbacks caused the myth itself to be substantively undermined without transforming the entire mythic structure itself. Indeed for a time the frontier myth appeared to go into a kind of hiatus. But as a succession of historical events continued to build upon one another in rapid succession throughout the 1970s—from the international oil crises, economic stagflation, Watergate, and the fall of Saigon in the first half of that decade, to a worsening American economy (in contrast to the economic ascendancy of Japan) and the humiliation of the Iranian hostage crisis in the latter half—this cumulative landslide of perceived national failures caused the entire frontier mythic structure to shift. Even before leaving office, LBJ had lost control of public support for his domestic and foreign policy programs. By the time the next Democratic president, Jimmy Carter, left the White House in January 1981 the longstanding liberal dominance of the frontier myth was in shambles.

As this dissertation will demonstrate, the entire structure of American frontier symbols and images had shifted political direction from the left to the right—a profound change not previously identified by scholars or political analysts. This dramatic change in the political nature of presidential associations with the frontier myth is significant and an important phenomenon in the history of American thought and presidential politics. Instead of a forward looking, progressive vision for America and the world which dominated use of Western symbolism for most of the twentieth century, the newer right wing frontier myth harmonized with the nostalgic aspirations and values espoused by the conservative Republican Ronald Reagan. The self-styled California cowboy Reagan tied into a mythic structure that was now nostalgic and backward

looking, anti- “big government,” and exclusionary of those could be included into the group of real, *bona fide* Americans. This more recent, narrower, conservative version of the frontier myth was new terrain that would have been unrecognizable in many respects to reforming liberals of their day like TR and LBJ. Events had transformed the structure, just as the structure continued to inform the events—even if it could not fully accommodate or explain them.

A full century after the quintessential cowboy president Theodore Roosevelt sat in the presidential saddle, conservative George W. Bush likewise attempted to deploy Western symbolism in the aftermath of 9/11 and, in particular, his prosecution of the Iraq War. But while going Western may have worked as a boon for Bush’s assertive policies in the early stages, by his second term this reliance on the conservative frontier myth had fallen as flat as it had for the liberal LBJ. And in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the power of the perceived frontier experience as an ideology for shaping federal policy and economic power appears, like the “Vanishing American” myth, to have once again receded.

Interestingly, since the 1980s scholars and observers have widely taken for granted that, in the realm of presidential politics and policy making, cowboy symbolism and frontier imagery have always been the property of conservative presidents and politicians.<sup>32</sup> The frontier myth has been portrayed as a touchstone of conservatism for

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<sup>32</sup> Historian Robert A. Goldberg recently acknowledged LBJ’s westernness, but then quickly dismissed its political potency for the Democratic president. Goldberg writes that Johnson’s 1964 Campaign opponent, the arch-conservative Barry Goldwater, “trumped LBJ” in his deployment of the frontier myth, “for the president’s liberal rhetoric and position as a Washington insider compromised his Western persona.” This dissertation’s findings would suggest otherwise. See Robert A. Goldberg, “The Western Hero in Politics: Barry Goldwater, Ronald Reagan, and the Rise of the American Conservative Movement.” In Jeff Roche, ed., *The Political Culture of the New West* (Lawrence KS: University of Kansas Press, 2008): 29. Three popular examples of the exclusive attachment of cowboys and the frontier to conservatives include: Gerstenzang, James. “That Retro Feel to Bush’s Style: It’s Reaganesque,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 12, 2003, A18, in the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley CA, Newspaper Reference Files, Bush, George W; Michael Allen and Romesh Ratnesar, “The End of Cowboy

rightist nostalgics who want to restore a way of life that had been “lost” by engaging in an anti-modern frontier myth-making of history. But Dippie and Sahlins’ insights challenge us to re-examine these conventional assumptions and to rethink the impact of the frontier myth themes and its role in US presidential history. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, this dissertation’s findings indicate that, in the realm of presidential politics, the dominance of the conservative frontier myth has in fact been a relatively recent phenomenon.

Similar to the historiographical approaches of Dippie and Sahlins’, I will contend that significant events of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have challenged American society and by extension the value of the frontier myth as a way of explaining and understanding America and in so doing caused the Frontier Myth to change and adapt. This study explores the dynamic tensions that have emerged as various cowboy presidents have sought to deploy the myth to explain and then deal with transformative historical events, and the degree to which these events, as Sahlins alerts us to, served to modify and transform the structures of the myth and of American society itself.

## **Thesis Argument**

The Frontier Myth is best understood as a powerful idea that is so deeply entrenched in Americans’ way of viewing themselves and rest of the world that it is capable of providing answers to the nation’s problems and of explaining America’s global role. From the outset, Turner’s thesis was a concept in search of validation; it’s ambiguous, amorphous characteristics allowed it to be poured into a wide array of

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Diplomacy,” *Time* [cover story], Vol. 168, Issue 3, July 17, 2006: 12-17; and “Reagan: An American Icon,” *USA Today Special Centennial Edition*, February 2011.

molds. As a result, certain US presidents of different eras and political ideologies have chosen to deploy the myth in response to a wide variety of problems and crises plaguing their respective generations. Since the “closing” of the American frontier, four presidents have become most associated with the myth and symbolism of the frontier discourse/epistemology: Theodore Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush. This dissertation explores how these four American presidents deployed, benefitted from (at least initially), and ultimately were constrained in the way in which they dealt with various events by the pervasive and persuasive power of the frontier myth, and ultimately, how the events served to inform and constrain the frontier myth. Each was altered by the other (Sahlins’ “structure of the conjuncture”), in the same way a bronc buster rides and adapts to the bull until one comes along that is too tough to ride. By extension, this dissertation will also test the argument (associated primarily in the non-American foreign press) that certain events, especially foreign wars and economic crises, spurred Americans to look for simple cowboy answers to complex problems. But as I will argue, while some of these events and crises could be subsumed, explained and dealt with according to the myths of the cowboy code and the Old West, other developments overwhelmed the Frontier Myth and caused the myth itself to change over time.

Theodore Roosevelt and Lyndon B. Johnson both used the frontier myth to move American politics to the left on domestic issues while at the same time viewing engagement with enemies overseas as the logical and necessary extension of the continental westering experience. Roosevelt and Johnson’s policies favoured a proactive federal government approach to American problems as opposed to focusing on individualism, and emphasized an optimistic “better and brighter” forward look toward

an American future of limitless possibilities over any desire to return to a nostalgic past. Roosevelt bolstered the role and strength of the federal government with the introduction of the regulation of big business, the vast expansion of conservation programs, and promotion of greater inclusion of minorities into the nation's "melting pot." But by the late 1960s, a liberal version of the frontier myth was in trouble as Johnson's "Great Society"—one of the two most ambitious liberal programs in the nation's history—appeared to falter due in large part to the ever growing commitment to the failing war in Vietnam. LBJ and American society were struggling to make sense of America's place in a rapidly changing world and wondered if the old rules of the Frontier Myth and its assumptions still applied. Popular movies and novels expressed the rise of the anti-Western that would see the tension between individualism and community stretched until it snapped with individualism carrying the day. In 1980, twelve years after Johnson left office, President Ronald Reagan dealt with economic stagflation and incidents associated with America's Cold War rivals, the Soviets, by looking *backward* in time to an America that "should have been." In terms of presidential politics and popular culture the frontier myth shifted and became the property of radical conservatives as opposed to progressive liberals. Reagan and his handlers tapped into myths and symbols that relied on so-called American tradition, an alternative lifestyle to what was said to be ailing the country based on the simple truths of the Old West: individualism, self-reliance, "know how" and higher values. Reaganites attached themselves to a revised frontier myth characterized by a restorative nostalgia that first sought a return to a longing for the good old days; encompassed a rebirth in national pride; and, second, in its darker manifestations, sought out enemies to be vanquished before the imagined homeland of old could be restored.

A shift had taken place, what I argue is best regarded as *the hinge* from Reagan to LBJ. Two political practitioners who came down on diametrically opposite polls—one calling for more government intervention, the other calling for much less—and both count on the frontier myth to deliver them popular support and a genuine answer to the crises facing their administrations. A dichotomy developed here and with it the discourse was rearticulated; the myth, or at very least its emphasis, adapted and changed—becoming a narrower, less flexible, conservative voice. Johnson’s attempts to bring the full myth forward collapsed and a reactionary, nostalgic way of understanding America replaced the more forward thinking, progressive approach. LBJ, promoter of the public good, was replaced by the deregulator and protector of big business, Ronald Reagan. Here what Sahlins regards as the events-structure dynamic took hold of American society. The series of events from 1965 to 1980 had caused the frontier myth structure to shift course and emphasis and accommodated this change. As this dissertation will reveal, tumultuous times and LBJ’s own contributions to these events caused the myth itself to be exposed as an inadequate vision out of touch with the realities of the late twentieth century; a vacuum that Reaganites would go to great lengths to exploit. After the crisis event known as 9/11, Republican President George W. Bush deployed his own interpretation of the Frontier Myth to allow him to react to Al-Qaeda and Iraq in certain ways but, as with LBJ, this too largely backfired. For Johnson and Bush, and to a lesser degree TR and Reagan as well, the myth had a discursive power that constrained and liberated actions by creating expectations among the public of what a cowboy nation should do and what a cowboy nation could do. Events that had rendered earlier expressions of the myth less viable for the Democrats in the 1960s and early 1970s would do much the same for the Republican George W. Bush in the 2000s.

Today, outside of Texas, when Republicans apply the frontier myth it is almost always in the context of their only modern presidential icon, Ronald Reagan, rather than the much more controversial Bush. The transformed myth's eventual inapplicability to Johnson and Bush (though retaining some of the same language) was in part a product of American presidential discourse and policy; more broadly, though, it was a victim of changing historical events and circumstances. The Frontier Myth in American presidential politics has historically been a pervasive, powerful and shifting image. Dippie and Sahlins provide us with the theoretical and interpretive tools for understanding how and why this has occurred. And since the days of the Johnson Administration, my dissertation will contend, the use to which the frontier myth has been put, and the success (or lack thereof) of this deployment by American Presidents has contributed to deeper division between liberals and conservatives in American politics in general and to the current polarization in the US Congress.

### **Thesis Organization**

John Cawelti states correctly in *Six Gun Mystique: The Sequel* that the Western is “a time and culture bound historical production.” That while there are some general constants in the archetypal nature and structure of the Western, “the Western as an evolving and changing expression of different stages of American cultural history” is also of importance.<sup>33</sup> Cawelti's argument is applicable to the Cowboy Presidents and their relationship with the Frontier Myth and it is in this spirit that my dissertation will examine the presidential deployment of the myth in the context of each president's own

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<sup>33</sup> John Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1999): 6.

times. In addition, significant changes to the Frontier Myth in literature and popular culture during the Presidents' respective periods in office and their influence—in the novels, film, radio and television of Owen Wister, Zane Grey, John Ford, John Wayne, Gene Autry, Louis L'Amour, Clint Eastwood and others—will be discussed as they relate to the individual chief executives and their administrations. And as indicated in the previous discussion of the historiography, the influence and uses of the frontier myth in shaping presidential policy and intertwined relationship between events, structure, and the changing frontier myth itself will be analyzed.

For the most part, “Cowboy Politics” is organized chronologically. The first two chapters examine Theodore Roosevelt's Presidency, the establishment of the first Cowboy President and his deployment of the frontier and western myths to explain and justify not only foreign and domestic situations (events), but also the specific policy agendas Roosevelt adopted. Roosevelt is unique among presidents in that as an historian, a celebrity, and politician he played a significant role, along with his friend the novelist Owen Wister, in establishing the Frontier Myth in the popular mind. TR's administration also represents the first time that the myth was accepted and used as a discursive framework sufficiently robust to account for the full range of American experience and policy (not simply a regional view).

Chapter III presents the limited deployment of the myth during the Presidencies spanning from William H. Taft through John F. Kennedy. This section is especially significant, though, for its examination of how, during the early to mid-twentieth century, the myth establishes itself firmly in American literature and popular culture as *the* single most pervasive and persuasive interpretive framework for understanding not only America's past but its solutions to present concerns. The influence of this mid-



century brand of the myth not only shaped the ideas of the American public but of future presidents LBJ, Reagan, and Bush 43.

Relying heavily on the documentation housed at the LBJ Library in Austin, Texas, the fourth, fifth and sixth chapters reveal Lyndon Johnson's conscious decision to "go Western" for liberal causes in 1958 through the end of his administration in 1969. LBJ's policies aimed at countering communism in Vietnam, promoting the "Great Society," War on Poverty and Civil Rights, and winning the space race fit with his early to mid-twentieth century visions of the frontier experience, but the liberal version of the myth ultimately fails to account for a tragic series of events that unravel American society and ultimately transform the myth itself. Chapter IV will focus on LBJ's pre-presidential years, his "passage to power" after JFK's assassination, and the 1964 presidential campaign; Chapter V on the first optimistic phase of Johnson's presidency including his unrolling of the "Great Society" and high-water mark of his presidency in 1965; and Chapter VI examines LBJ's tragic "second presidency," his credibility gap, race riots, the counter culture the quagmire of Vietnam, and his decision not to seek a second term. The late 1960s, as we shall see, set the stage for a frontier myth in hiatus.

Chapter VII explores the event-structure relationship, "the hinge" as events bring about a left-to-right transformation of the frontier myth from LBJ to Reagan. Analysis includes the rise of the anti-Western, reaction against LBJ, his legacy, the turning away from the Cowboy myth during the presidencies of Nixon, Ford and Carter, with remaining elements of the Western story being portrayed through other genres and its resurgence in conservative form with the 1980 Reagan campaign. This volatile era was rife with events (such as assassinations, race riots, the counter culture, collapse in Vietnam, Watergate, a series of economic crises, and the Iranian hostage taking) that the

structure of LBJ's liberal democratic expression of the frontier myth found itself ill prepared to deal with. In this milieu the stage was set for a conservative revival of the Frontier Myth in American politics.

Chapter VIII and IX look at Reagan's capturing of the cowboy image for the Republican right in the 1980s: how events and changing contexts caused reduction of government assistance programs, deregulation, tax cuts and a "big stick" military to counter Soviet "aggression." How RR's declaration of himself as a "Sagebrush rebel," and business frontiers agenda now also came to dominate presidential ties to the frontier mythology. Chapter VIII explores Reagan's image, philosophy, and the conservative revision of the Frontier Myth depicted in TV's JR Ewing-like tycoons and Hollywood's *Right Stuff* cowboys. Perhaps for the first time, the White House was occupied by a president who believed that history reflected movies, rather than the reverse. Chapter IX covers Reagan's foreign and domestic policy frontiers—what the myth's change in emphasis enabled him to do, how it constrained him, and how we can understand the Reagan Administration in terms of how its actions were a product of the Frontier Myth.

George W. Bush and his Dirty Harry-style "Cowboy Diplomacy" is the subject of Chapter X as he deploys cowboy and frontier rhetoric in response to 9/11, raising both hopes and expectations concerning America's mission in the Middle East and indeed the world. And Chapter XI examines the shift in popular music's reception and then rejection of the Bush frontiers, the president's unsuccessful efforts to play down the rhetoric once his "mission accomplished" claims did not materialize, today's Republicans and their use (or abuse) of "Cowboy Reagan" into an icon of the GOP, Democrats reluctance to deploy the image, and the role that the currently waning and

less inclusive Frontier Myth has played in creating the current state of American national politics. The conclusion will summarize my main findings and discuss the implications of the power of the Frontier Myth in American presidential politics and society.

## I.

### **Theodore Roosevelt: The Rise of the Frontier Myth and Education of the First Cowboy President**

It was still the Wild West in those days, the far West, the West of Owen Wister's stories and Frederic Remington's drawings, the West of the Indian and the buffalo-hunter, the soldier and the cow-puncher....In that land we led a free and hardy life, with horse and rifle....and ours was the glory of work and the joy of living.

—Theodore Roosevelt, "In Cowboy Land,"  
*Autobiography of Theodore Roosevelt* (1913)<sup>34</sup>

#### **Introduction**

Theodore Roosevelt was the original Cowboy President and the Chief Executive with the closest political and personal ties to the Frontier Myth. Unlike his three later frontier-style successors—Johnson, Reagan and W. Bush—Roosevelt not only responded to and employed the ideas and symbolism of the myth as President, he had lived out and helped develop many of its features and wrote about them in a plethora of publications. TR modeled himself closely on the romantic cowboy/frontiersman image and, through his highly publicized exploits, writings and orations, contributed substantively to the myth's shape and power in the closing decades of the nineteenth century and dawn of the twentieth. Possibly the best known American of his times, Roosevelt came to be idolized by millions of Americans as a tough and tenacious, self-made frontiersman who pushed his wilderness adventures to the limit—in locales ranging from the Dakota

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<sup>34</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, "In Cowboy Land" (Chapter 4) in *The Autobiography of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Octagon Books, r1975): 58-59.

Territory to San Juan Hill—then carried his trademark “strenuosity” and “get action” philosophies over to his presidency. TR was *the* key political figure in creating a way of looking at the frontier as a way for Americans to look at themselves.

One cannot fully understand both the origins of the modern Frontier Myth structure and the extent of its power without also having an understanding of Theodore Roosevelt and of how his own experiences and related ideas developed alongside it. As the myth became increasingly influential it adapted and changed. Likewise many of Roosevelt’s views would not remain static over time. Employing the Frontier Myth as his mantra, TR typically placed himself on the leading edge of an era of intense social change and modernization. Man and myth were inseparable—joined at the hip—and underwent a kind of evolution from the 1880s through Roosevelt’s death in 1919.

This chapter explores Theodore Roosevelt’s formative years in the context and in direct relation to the rise of the Frontier Myth. Most notably, we will examine Roosevelt’s own lessons learned from his cowboy experience in the badlands of North Dakota and how this helped shape his ideas on the role of government, values of individualism vs. community, the common man, democracy, and America’s future. We will also look at *The Winning of the West* series and other writings that articulated and publicized these ideas, ensuring his place as a chief proponent and shaper of the Frontier Myth. Next we examine his promotion of masculinity, American-style heroism and the frontier ethic for Westerners *and* Easterners alike, all of which reached an apex with his hugely publicized Rough Rider “adventures” in Cuba. Related to this was his skilful employment of new technologies and use of the media to promote both the symbolism of the Frontier Myth and the parallel trajectory of his own career (“I rose like a rocket”). Also important was his role in the 1900 presidential campaign as the perfect

“cowboy” foil for the relatively bland head of the ticket, William McKinley. And finally this chapter examines Roosevelt’s presidential association with the rise of the cowboy in popular culture and its entrenchment in the American self-image through, in particular, Owen Wister’s bestselling novel, *The Virginian*.

Throughout these years of Roosevelt’s own education and transformation, his thoughts focused on many of the cultural preoccupations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These preoccupations included: the realization that the US was becoming predominantly urban rather than rural; the influx of “new immigrants” from eastern and southern Europe that was changing the nation’s ethnic mix; an increasing awareness of the dramatic changes being wrought by industrialization and new technologies; a growing sense of the complexity of modern society and related treatment of those working in it; belief that morals and men’s physical strength and closeness to nature were declining; and the quest for some sense of regeneration and reassurance.

It was during these last two decades of the nineteenth century that an increasing number of Americans challenged the prevailing theory that government should stay out of the affairs of business. More and more Americans vigorously questioned and doubted the assumption that the individual left to their own discretion would always act in the public interest. They insisted that there was a public interest that had to be protected from the private interest and became suspicious of the growing power of big corporations. Roosevelt grappled with and carefully considered these issues too along with what role government could and should play in them. And TR did this against the backdrop of his, and increasingly the nation’s, idealized vision of earlier generations’ life on the frontier. How Roosevelt responded to these matters would ultimately strike a

responsive chord with much of the American public as the vision he shared of the Frontier Myth appeared to satisfy the seemingly contradictory needs of reaffirming old values whilst seeking solutions to new problems in an increasingly urban, industrial America.

In foreign affairs Theodore Roosevelt and millions of his fellow Americans also held to (and in his case, lived by) the frontier concept of American *exceptionalism* and an American “mission.” Roosevelt was acutely aware of America’s new role of becoming a world power and also of its brief historical experience for creating a clear sense of national identity and unity and this provided a motivation for both of these concepts. The belief in an American “mission” was nothing new; Manifest Destiny being the nineteenth century equivalent. Indeed the idea of the West as a kind of safety valve for the problems of an increasingly urbanized, corporatized and now modern industrial nation, dated back to Thomas Jefferson’s colonial period and had intellectual roots planted even before that in the Old World.

As Brian Dippie and other scholars demonstrated, myths held in the past could be extremely influential—particularly when grabbed hold of by a public relations powerhouse like Roosevelt. The social milieu of the late nineteenth century was in many respects a watershed period of change in American society and perfectly suited to the rise of TR and emergence of a powerful strain of the Frontier Myth. Though the regional frontier itself was now “officially” closed, the *idea* of the American Frontier would emerge stronger than ever.

The forceful, optimistic bent of TR and the Frontier Myth, as identified by Ray Allen Billington, provided a sense among turn-of-the-century Americans that the “taming” of the West—so tough yet so successful in the eyes of most Euro-Americans—

could now be applied to all of the nation's challenges ranging from crowded cities to foreign affairs. Sahlins demonstrates that social/cultural structures based on myths are highly influential because they have the ability to accommodate almost everything that occurs in society. The close relationship between events, structure and the Frontier Myth are unmistakable. And it will be asserted here that Roosevelt's accidental rise to the presidency in the context of contemporary events of his day essentially guaranteed that the Frontier Myth would establish itself as the symbolic unifier of the nation: enabling a more robust transition from the traditions and concerns of the old frontier of the nineteenth century to the challenges of the new frontiers of the twentieth.

### **Earning his Spurs: A "Frontier" President in the Making**

Theodore Roosevelt's experiences in the badlands out West, while coming of age in his 'twenties, have long been viewed as having changed forever his ideas about the history of the United States and his vision for the nation's future. His political force of will and constant battles "for the right" in fitting out a new Navy, challenging the tainted meat industry, or promoting his New Nationalism, are attributed by scholars and popular observers as resulting in large part from his experience out West. This is *not* merely perception. Roosevelt very consciously recognized this relationship himself. While visiting Fargo in 1910, Roosevelt told a large crowd: "If it had not been for what I learned in North Dakota, I never in the world would have been President of the United States."<sup>35</sup> Roosevelt's learned willingness to take risks, good versus evil conception of

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<sup>35</sup> "Immense Throng Hears Labor Day Address," *Fargo Forum and Daily Republican*, September 5, 1910, p. 8, quoted in Stacy Cordery, "The Western Brand of Roosevelt," May 25, 2011 Blog at the Theodore Roosevelt Center, online at <http://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/Blog/2011/May/25-The-Western-Brand-of-Roosevelt.aspx> (accessed 29 January 2016). Today this quote or some variation of it appears in



the world, sense of democratic egalitarianism and of community, and seemingly limitless “strenuosity”—that became integral parts of his Dakota Territory experiences—all arguably made direct connections to his later political career. What has not been understood previously is that as Roosevelt acted on his own belief and faith in the emerging Frontier Myth he also played a more significant role in helping shape its early manifestations and several of its long-term features than *any* other politician.

At this point some background is required to better understand TR’s entry on to the myth-making scene. The Frontier vision’s central figure at the turn-of-the-century, the cowboy, had been receiving attention in the eastern press since the 1870s. Initially these cowmen or “herders” were depicted as a mangy, squalid crew of peace-disturbing yahoos. But in 1882, while attending the first Wild West show in North Platte, Nebraska, popular writer Prentiss Ingraham had already begun to create a more heroic cowboy figure in his own series of frontier stories. Wallace Stegner has written that “Ingraham immortalized this rodeo cowboy, first in a fictitious biography and then in a series of dime novels. He devised for him some colorful semi-Mexican garb that made him picturesque, and he endowed him with all the skill, courage and masculine grace that have marked every heroic expression of the folk mind from Leatherstocking to Superman.” About the same time that Ingraham was putting pen to paper, Roosevelt was propagating a similarly romantic legend of the western frontier by living it and ensuring that the press was close at hand to report on his adventures in the “wilderness.” Ingraham and Roosevelt were soon to be joined by their two other distinguished Eastern contemporaries, western author Owen Wister (a close friend of

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numerous North Dakota tourist brochures, and on signs at national parks, shopping malls and paintball fields.

TR's dating back to their Harvard days) and the artist Frederic Remington.<sup>36</sup> But what brought TR west in the first place?

Theodore Roosevelt had been born into one of the wealthiest families in New York, and his deep and abiding interest in politics and experiences out West were atypical of his eastern establishment heritage. During Theodore's early days in the New York State Assembly (at a time when politics was snubbed by most of his privileged class), several colleagues viewed him as effete and taunted him with names that included "Punkin' Lily" and "Jane Dandy." Though such comments made Roosevelt's hair stand on end, tenaciousness was his forte. In 1883 Roosevelt came West partly as a tourist but also to share in the tough day-to-day existence that defined the ranchman. TR wanted to be viewed across the nation as having earned his spurs. The first frontiersman photos taken of Roosevelt at a New York studio that same year (see Figure 1.1) were almost certainly shot, and widely distributed, to impress and to shrug off those who earlier criticized his manliness. TR decked himself out in attire that combined the popular images of Daniel Boone with Davey Crockett: "Putting on the buckskin,"<sup>37</sup> he appeared in a fringed shirt along with a beaver felt cap and a hunting knife purchased at Tiffany's. Roosevelt's first brief sojourn out West, followed by the photo shoot, might have ended his adventures on the vanishing frontier right then and there. Apparently he had achieved what he had set out to do. But on Valentine's Day of 1884, the future president suffered a heart-wrenching double tragedy when his beloved young wife, Alice, and his mother, Martha,

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<sup>36</sup> For a description of the early eastern image of the cowboy see Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York: Vintage Books, 1950): 109. Wallace Stegner quoted in Ben M. Vorpal, *"My Dear Wister": The Frederic Remington-Owen Wister Letters* (Palo Alto, CA: American West Publishing, 1972): viii-ix.

<sup>37</sup> Roosevelt admitted to a Dakota companion that he was "most anxious to get a buckskin suit....the most picturesque and distinctively national dress ever worn in America." TR quoted in White, *Eastern Establishment*, 83-84.

both died within a twelve hour span in the same house. At first the devastated Roosevelt attempted to throw himself full bore into his work but before long it became evident that a stronger tonic was needed and TR escaped from his sorrows to a Cattle Ranch that he purchased on the Little Missouri River, just a few miles from the town of Medora in the Dakota Territory.

In the Badlands, for much of the next three years, Roosevelt immersed himself completely into what became the two of the great passions of his life: the American frontier West and hunting. A glance at the second photo below (Figure 1.2) of his cowboy image, this one taken two years later than the “buckskin” photo, gives a sense of the impact that this more serious Western experience had on TR. Gone is his fancy costume and garb of 1883, now instead he appears tough and self-assured in a Stetson and working boots. Having “hardened up” his body and added 30 pounds of muscle, we no longer see a young Roosevelt looking off into the distance at make believe prey in a New York studio; instead it is a transformed TR standing tall, facing us, glaring at the viewer. These images were part of a broader life story which Roosevelt himself documented and published to a degree not matched by any President before or since.



**Figure 1.1: Frontiersman TR in 1883; and Figure 1.2: Cowboy TR c1885. The TR at right is no “Punkin’ Lily” but instead the cool and toughened up kind of individual that Owen Wister had in mind when his *Virginian* responded to an insult with: “When you call me that, SMILE.”<sup>38</sup> (Left: Courtesy Library of Congress, Photographer: George Grantham Bain, Photographs Division, #LC-USZ62-41723. Right: Courtesy of the Theodore Roosevelt Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, R500.P69a-012).**

During this Western phase of his life, Roosevelt wrote to his close friend Henry Cabot Lodge: “You would be amused to see me, in my broad sombrero hat, fringed and beaded buckskin shirt, horse hide chaparajos or riding trousers, and cowhide boots, with braided bridle and silver spurs.” Roosevelt was aware of his own performance and he worked hard to show the public, his ranch hands, and himself, that there was substance to his new persona too: that while an Easterner by birth, this hombre was not only playing cowboy—he *was* a cowboy. And as early as December 1884, journalists took

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<sup>38</sup> Owen Wister, *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains* (New York: Macmillan, 1904 ed.): 29.

notice of the toughened up Roosevelt. On Christmas Eve, the *New York Times* posted a front page story describing what must have been an odd sight on the streets of Gotham: “Theodore Roosevelt, of New York, dropped into the Grand Pacific Hotel this morning enveloped in an overcoat of coonskin, wearing a fur cap, and carrying a rifle and shotgun.” If he were acting, TR was playing out his role to the hilt and with conviction. Describing TR’s “trophies” on a recent hunting trip to Montana, the *Times* detailed that: “He killed three grizzly bears, six elk, and innumerable antelopes. Several buffaloes also fell before his rifle, and he represented that he had stopped counting the small game he bagged.” The nearsighted TR was reportedly most proud of the skin of a twelve hundred pound grizzly which had ambled within nine feet of the hunter before he saw it. “The animal had seen the Assemblyman,” the *Times* conjectured, “and was doubtless preparing to embrace him in brotherly fashion when a well-directed rifle ball struck him in the forehead.” By the mid-1880s TR meant business on the hunt, typically setting out with three powerful and custom made rifles and 1200 rounds of ammunition. Richard C. Rattenbury speculates in *Hunting in the American West* that: “Clearly, if surrounded by a battalion of bears, he [Roosevelt] could stand a protracted siege....As it happened the bears came up one at a time.” Roosevelt’s well publicized hunts were not just about the beasts he bagged: even more so they were appreciated by TR and much of the public for their association with the imagined origins of the country and its heroic individuals in the wilderness. Here TR was maintaining both personal and promoting national virility as he labored diligently to create an iconic image for himself that placed a high value on his self-reliant and individual interactions with the frontier. His “putting on the buckskin” and later the Stetson in New York symbolized the distance between his new

Western persona that connected with the primeval origins of the nation and that of the modern, industrial, urban areas.<sup>39</sup>

In addition to these hunting exploits, TR was becoming well known as both a cowboy and a rancher out West. In his writings Roosevelt emphasizes that he put in as many hours in the saddle as his companions: "Once when with Sylvane Ferris," TR recalled, "I spent about sixteen hours on one horse, riding seventy or eighty miles....Another time I was twenty-four hours on horseback in company with Merrifield without changing horses."<sup>40</sup> Roosevelt also describes himself as more than willing to tackle the toughest and riskiest jobs on the ranch (such as branding duty) and off of it as well. In *Ranch Life and the Hunting-Trail* (1896) he tells of his encounters with a barroom lout, the time he alone faced down five armed Sioux Indians, and led a posse to capture a gang of thieves who stole his boat. In this latter grueling effort, TR's heavily publicized refusal to be bullied went so far as to have Roosevelt posing for press photos during a staged reenactment of his making the arrest of the three boat thieves. TR knew how to cultivate both good press and his celebrity status.

Biographer John Milton Cooper wrote that "The West seemed to complete Roosevelt's self-transformation." From this point onward, TR's "frontier experience" became an integral part of TR's political philosophy and public life. In both myth and reality, TR came out of the Badlands and returned to the East robust and transformed: a man who had been remade emotionally, physically and mentally. TR was now convinced

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<sup>39</sup> TR correspondence to Lodge quoted in Edmund Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: The Modern Library, 1979): 283; "Theodore Roosevelt as a Hunter," *New York Times*, December 24, 1884: 1, in *ProQuest Historical Newspapers* (accessed June 25, 2012); Richard C. Rattenbury, *Hunting the American West: The Pursuit of Big Game for Life, Profit, and Sport, 1800-1900* (Missoula MT: Boone and Crockett Club, 2008): 333.

<sup>40</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, *The Autobiography of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Octagon Books, 1975): 72.

that only through one's encounters with the wilderness and wild beasts could national vigor be maintained. Out West in the 1880s, he witnessed firsthand the loss of game due to unregulated hunting along with the destruction of grasslands due to overgrazing. These frontiers, he began to argue, needed to be set aside and regulated so that men could disconnect themselves from their regular lives and immerse themselves in a wilderness and live out the frontier experience. Roosevelt wrote: "The free, self-reliant, adventurous life, with its rugged and stalwart democracy; the wild surroundings, the grand beauty of the scenery, the chance to study the ways and habits of the woodland creatures—all these unite to give to the career of the wilderness hunter its peculiar charm." Conserving wild spaces in an age of rapid urbanization and development was also a key to TR's vision and increasingly the nation's of preserving manhood and national identity.<sup>41</sup>

In his autobiography Roosevelt admitted that "There were all kinds of things of which I was afraid at first, ranging from grizzly bears to 'mean' horses and gunfighters; but by acting as if I was not afraid I gradually ceased to be afraid." Arguably then, TR's experience in the Dakotas also reinforced his belief that evils and dangers in the world needed to be confronted where possible and faced down. Relatedly, he had concluded from personal experiences in the West that aggression and insult could only be defeated through determination and strength ("a cowboy," Roosevelt explained, "will not submit tamely to an insult, and is very ready to avenge his own wrongs"). For the TR of the late nineteenth century, projecting American power throughout the Western hemisphere and the Pacific—whether this meant annexing Hawaii and Cuba or teaching the Spanish

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<sup>41</sup> John Milton Cooper, Jr. *The Warrior and the Priest: Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983): 30; Theodore Roosevelt, *The Wilderness Hunter* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1893): xv, online from *Google Books* (accessed June 25, 2012).

a lesson in the Philippines—was a logical projection of American power westward that flowed, logically, from the “winning of the West” experience on the Frontier.<sup>42</sup>

Another important but often overlooked aspect of Roosevelt’s days living out the “frontier experience” is that it convinced him that mutual support could be crucial to individual well-being and that practicing communal habits could positively impact on the lives of individuals. Many of his stories out West include references to how his comrades helped one another out in their frequently dangerous work. In his writings, TR explains at some length that he was much more successful at the hunt with his skilled companion William Merrifield, the foreman of his ranch, than on his own and that more than once his friend helped get TR out of awkward predicaments. Near the end of *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman*, he tells us: “The first thing that a Western plainsman has to learn is the capacity for self-help, but at the same time he must not forget that occasions may arise when the help of others will be most grateful.” Likewise in *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*, TR explains that despite their code of self-reliance, ranchmen are working more and more together—uniting to form associations such as the Montana Stock Growers’ Association which reaped “countless benefits.” At various points in these stories, Roosevelt underscores the fact that “manly qualities” not only include toughness, individualism, and bravery, but also hospitality, cooperation and camaraderie. Character was key to success on the frontier as well. Selfish, lazy, mean, cowardly and dishonest types were not welcome in the cattle country and, in TR’s narrative, could not prosper there. Roosevelt himself organized the Little Missouri Stockmen’s Association which created and enforced new regulations, dismissed the

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<sup>42</sup> TR quoted in David McCullough, *Mornings on Horseback* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981): 345; Theodore Roosevelt, “The Round Up,” *Century Illustrated Magazine*, Vol. 35 (1888): 855.



region's failed livestock inspector, and banded together to thwart cattle rustlers. Long before TR's talk of a Square Deal and the New Nationalism, then, his Western experience had taught him that mutual support is crucial to individual well-being.<sup>43</sup>

TR's related concepts of democratic egalitarianism were also, almost certainly, strongly influenced by his Dakota life. In the Badlands the once snobbish Roosevelt of his Harvard and Columbia Law School days came to acquire, first hand, a genuine respect for "regular" folks and their values. Related to this his ranch hands and neighbours later insisted that TR always treated them decently rather than as lower class types. And this attitude of respect stuck. When Roosevelt, as President, travelled out West to visit local farmers and ranch hands in 1903, he wrote his secretary of state, John Hay, that "For all the superficial differences between us, these men and I think a good deal alike or at least have the same ideals." Speaking to an audience of primarily cowboys and cowgirls in Cheyenne, Wyoming, Roosevelt stated that the ideals represented on the frontier were those of the whole country. In terms of progress he told the crowd: "In continually and earnestly striving for [the] betterment of social and economic conditions in our complex industrial civilization, we should work in the old frontier spirit of rugged strength and courage, and yet with the old frontier spirit of brotherly comradeship and good will." It is a set of themes—mutual respect, "strenuosity," pursuing the public good, democracy, and national unity based on

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<sup>43</sup> TR quotes appear in: Paul M. Rego, *American Ideal: Theodore Roosevelt's Search for American Individualism* (Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2008): 60; *Ibid*, 61; Description of Roosevelt's role in the Stockmen's Association described in *Ibid*, 52.

frontier principles—that TR would refer to and act upon frequently during his presidential years and in the decade which followed them.<sup>44</sup>

### **Historians Roosevelt and Turner: Foundations of the Frontier Myth**

Biographer Edmund Morris has described Roosevelt's best-selling six part book series, *The Winning of the West* (1889-1896) as "the first comprehensive statement of his Americanism, and by extension (since he 'was' America), of himself." Here, to a greater degree than in any of his other writings, TR combined his western adventures with his scholarly ambitions of being an historian. The field of history for Roosevelt meant history more as a form of literature (as in the tradition of the historian whom he most revered, Francis Parkman) rather than as an academic profession. And TR had certain agendas in mind, which in turn helped shape the evolving contours of the Frontier Myth. Significantly, the first two volumes of TR's magnum opus, published in 1889, both placed an emphasis on glorifying the individualistic, free, outdoorsmen of action: Anglo-Saxon heroes who defeated stubborn Indians who stood in their way. But by Volumes III and IV, published in 1894 and 1896 respectively, there is a very noticeable shift in tone. Less confident on the declarations of Anglo-Saxon superiority, Roosevelt instead places an emphasis on the need for a strong central government to unify the nation's sense of effort and purpose. Also, in contrast to the earlier editions, *too much* independence and individualism now emerge as serious threats to the nation's well-being and its efforts to establish an empire. Roosevelt warns his readers that by failing to understand the vital need for "a strong, efficient, central government, backed

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<sup>44</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, *Cowboys and Kings: Three Great Letters by Theodore Roosevelt* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954): 2; "Roosevelt Speaks at Cheyenne on Western Frontier Life," *Wall Street Journal*, August 29, 1910: 3.

by a good fleet and a well-organized army' the men of the West were almost lost to the nation." He even ends the third volume on a prophetic note: "At the close of the Revolution the West was seething with sedition....If the spirit of sedition, of lawlessness, and of wild individualism and separatism had conquered, then our history would merely have anticipated the dismal tale of the Spanish-American republics." Roosevelt's Frontier West, and that increasingly envisioned by the nation, was now first and foremost not a celebration of Anglo-Saxon superiority and isolated individualism but of the triumph of national unity, community, and the efforts of a relatively strong national government.<sup>45</sup>

Roosevelt's later volumes of *The Winning of the West* also advanced the brand new idea of an American melting pot: years before that phrase was coined by playwright Israel Zangwill. "Under the hard conditions of life in the wilderness," TR explained to his readers, the frontier experience "was enough to weld together into one people the representatives of these numerous and widely different races." In their frontier encounters, immigrants from across Europe in particular were required to adopt the values of individualism "tempered by common sense," and of democratic community. Together these frontier values would allow them to throw off their decadent Old World cultures and embrace the new: transforming them into "Americans pure and simple." While having the "right" ethnicity still may have mattered to some (including TR's friends, the novelist Owen Wister and artist Frederic Remington) to Roosevelt, the frontier experience mattered even more. For the Myth had provided both citizens and recent arrivals to America and to the West, in particular, the opportunity to build a

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<sup>45</sup> Edmund Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*, 474; TR quote and quotation from Forrest G. Robinson, "The Roosevelt-Wister Connection: Some Notes on the West and the Uses of History," *Western American Literature*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Summer 1979): 103; Preface to *The Winning of the West*, Vol. III, p. iii quoted in Robinson, "The Roosevelt-Wister Connection," 105.

national culture from its diverse elements. As Turner had explained, in this unique country where “the wilderness masters the colonist” the “outcome is not Old Europe...here is a new product that is American.”<sup>46</sup>

Roosevelt’s own evolving ideas about the meaning of the frontier—and beginning in 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner’s—were clearly related to the social and political issues of their day, including the Populists cries for sectionalism in the 1890s, the “new immigration” from southern Europe and Russia, and the strong impulse for American imperialism. The relationship between events and the evolving Frontier Myth’s structure (re: Sahlins) is unmistakable. Not surprisingly then, Roosevelt’s *Winning of the West* and Turner’s “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (which John Mack Faragher describes as *the* most influential piece of writing in the history of American history) have numerous connections and resonances. Turner himself had described TR as one who embodied those frontier ideals of the “all-around American” (Turner’s emphasis) who rose to what he became because he “lived the West, as well as studied it.” Beginning in 1893, the two men would correspond for at least two decades and it was their legitimizing histories that provided a key substantive foundation to the myth. Turner, as Michael L. Collins notes, owed a huge debt to Roosevelt. Months before the young scholar delivered his paper at Chicago’s World’s Fair, Roosevelt had addressed the State Historical Society of Wisconsin—Turner in the audience carefully taking notes—and declared the Old Northwest as the “heart of the country.” A year later after reading Turner’s “Significance” essay, Roosevelt sent off his first letter to Turner

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<sup>46</sup> TR quoted in Forrest G. Robinson, “The Roosevelt-Wister Connection,” p. 103; Roosevelt, *Winning of the West*, Vol. III, p. iii; TR “melting pot” quotations in Leroy G. Dorsey and Rachel M. Harlow. “We Want Americans Pure and Simple”: Theodore Roosevelt and the Myth of Americanism,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, Vol. 6, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 58, 62, 73, 74; Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier,” 201.

writing of the thesis that: “It comes at the right time for me, for I intend to make use of it in writing the third volume of my “Winning of the West”....I think you have struck some first class ideas, and have put into definite shape a good deal of thought which has been floating around rather loosely.” As historian Douglas Brinkley points out, TR was being generous in his comments and the two men formed a kind of alliance in promoting the frontier hypothesis: TR being the “popular oracle” and Professor Turner promoting it among his fellow academics.<sup>47</sup>

Historian Richard Slotkin offered a somewhat darker interpretation of Roosevelt’s evolving vision of the frontier than I do here. Slotkin asserted that TR, during his pre-presidential career, remained caught up in an elitist, imperialist and racist view of the frontier that caused him to act as a class biased and moralizing bully.<sup>48</sup> Slotkin was correct in stating that Roosevelt’s (and Turner’s) imperialist view of Western expansion offered an arrogant view of the victors in the long campaigns to “win the West” (with Native Americans cast in the anti-progressive role of the few who stood in the way of the many) but this study also contends that, by the 1890s, Roosevelt’s views were becoming more nuanced and complex than has been widely assumed. In TR’s mind, American exceptionalism and in particular its relationship to the frontier model now trumped many of the racial stereotypes of his day. Like Turner, TR had claimed that upon contact with the wilderness, pioneers were stripped of their European traits and that people of diverse ancestry were blended together into a great “melting pot” which made up the

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<sup>47</sup> John Mack Faragher, *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner*, 1; Turner quoted in Ronald H. Carpenter, “Frederick Jackson Turner and the Rhetorical Impact of the Frontier Thesis” (1977): FN #229, p. 122; Douglas Brinkley, *The Wilderness Warrior: Theodore Roosevelt and the Crusade for America* (New York: Harper, 2009): 241; Theodore Roosevelt correspondence to Frederick Jackson Turner, (Washington) February 10, 1894, in Elting E. Morison, ed. *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, Volume 1, 1868-1898 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951): 363; Brinkley, *The Wilderness Warrior*, 241.

<sup>48</sup> See especially Richard Slotkin, “The American West, as Seen by Europeans and Americans,” *European Contributions to American Studies*, Vol. 16 (March 1989): 67-68.

West. And Roosevelt, in particular, did not believe that the old society could ever be restored and accepted: instead TR embraced and sought to directly influence the changing realities of the twentieth century. For the essentially optimistic Roosevelt, progressivism would continue moving Americans toward a better way of life: one that had continually evolved from its frontier roots. Never one to be left in the dust, TR recognized that society was changing and that the meaning and relevance of the frontier experience was also changing. In so many respects Roosevelt was among those at the forefront of these evolving attitudes.

### **Roosevelt's "Everyman" Attributes and Cowboy Hero Image**

In his classic study of Roosevelt's years in the Badlands, Hermann Hagedorn describes how during his first days out West the cowboys of North Dakota did not know quite what to make of him. Indeed, TR's large, round glasses made him look to the ranchmen "very much like a curiously nervous and emphatic owl." But according to later interviews with the ranchmen who worked for and with Roosevelt, he soon came to be respected for his grit, stamina, and willingness to take on the toughest and riskiest jobs without complaint. This relationship of camaraderie along with TR's cowboy prowess, was played up in the press for years to come. *The Galveston Daily News* offered a typical example in 1895 when reporting: "It is said of him [TR] that when in the west among the cowboys and the hunters of the Rockies...he is an excellent shot, a superb rider and a master of the pioneer's craft, he has invariably succeeded in winning and holding the respect of those with whom he came in contact in the wilds." Though Roosevelt did not make such claims of exceptional abilities himself (he let others do this

for him) he did encourage the perception that he left on very good terms with those of his “kind.”<sup>49</sup>

While much was made of TR’s acceptance by his fellow-cowboys, almost as much was reported about his respect for them and of “Ol’ Four Eyes” apparent transformation from an aristocrat to a democrat as a direct result of his experiences out West.<sup>50</sup> If TR had been born with blue blood, the red-blooded Roosevelt has been regarded as a product of his years in the Dakota Territory. Based on the accounts of those who knew Roosevelt best, there appears to be substance to these assertions. George Bird Grinnell, co-founder of the Boone and Crockett Club, believed that TR “learned his first lessons in real democracy” on the frontier since it was there that he was “constantly associating with men of various classes and types.” Roosevelt’s long-time friend, the author Owen Wister emphatically agreed, adding that Roosevelt’s western frontier experience “played a very important [role] in his intellectual growth and his outlook as a statesman.”<sup>51</sup> And, as suggested above, TR himself later acknowledged that “I owe more than I can express to...the men and women I met in the West.” He adds that they “quite unconsciously helped me, by the insight which working and living with them enabled me to get into the mind and soul of the average American.”<sup>52</sup> Roosevelt’s comments only contributed

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<sup>49</sup> See especially Hermann Hagedorn. *Roosevelt in the Badlands* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1921): 101-102; Owl quote in White, *Eastern Establishment*, 83; “A Young Reformer: New York’s Police Commissioner a Young Man of Unusual Energy,” *The Galveston Daily News*, June 23, 1895: 10.

<sup>50</sup> Early works about Roosevelt that engage this subject include: Hagedorn, *Roosevelt in the Badlands*, v; William Roscoe Thayer, *Theodore Roosevelt: An Intimate Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1919): 56-58; and Owen Wister, *Roosevelt: The Story of a Friendship* (New York: Macmillan, 1930): 8. Two more recent account which explores some aspects of the influence of TR’s life out West on his own ideas and actions is Michael L. Collins, *That Damned Cowboy: Theodore Roosevelt and the American West, 1883-1898* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989); and Roger L. DiSilvestro, *Theodore Roosevelt in the Badlands: A Young Politician’s Quest for Recovery in the American West* (New York: Walker and Co., 2010): 170-171, 252-253.

<sup>51</sup> Grinnell quoted in Collins, *That Damned Cowboy*, 158; Wister quoted in *Ibid*.

<sup>52</sup> Roosevelt, *The Autobiography of Theodore Roosevelt*, p. 76; *Ibid*, 77.

further to his invaluable persona as a man of the people—as when he stated publicly that: “I regard my experience during those years, when I lived and worked with my own fellow-ranchmen on what was then the frontier, as the most important educational asset of my life....I know how the man that works with his hands and the man on the ranch are thinking, because I have been there, and am thinking that way myself.”<sup>53</sup> Roosevelt saw himself as having gained an understanding of the American public at large and as one who could and should look out for the general public’s interests.

Roosevelt’s increasingly “common man” persona and closely associated Western experience only heightened his popularity and status all the more with the American public and the press. “Though enriched by the best culture of the East,” the *Zion’s Herald* reported in 1895, “Mr. Roosevelt has always found delight in the adventures and progress of the wild West....How greatly he delights in his visits to this Western Tadmor [his ranches] is evident from the way he has written about them. He is as much at home with the ranchers and cowboys of the frontier as at the city club dinner or in the office of the New York Police Board.” Before long TR’s “everyman” attributes were contributing directly to his growing heroic persona as well. And Roosevelt helped this along himself by always ensuring that his heroic exploits were fully covered in the press. At the mid-point of the 1890s decade, almost every newspaper account of TR it seemed, included a sketch of cowboy TR reeling and firing from his horse, next to his horse, or in some kind of gritty, heroic pose. All along his alleged “commonplace” origins were played up while his own actual privileged upbringing in New York was not mentioned. One remarkably lengthy headline in the *Washington Post* summed up the overall take on TR succinctly:

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<sup>53</sup> Roosevelt speech quoted in David H. Murdoch, *The American West: The Invention of a Myth* (Reno; Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 2001): 70-71.



“Roosevelt on a Ranch—Gotham’s Reformer Appears in the Role of a Cowboy—Terror to Typical Badmen—Teddy Can Shoot, Ride, and Box with the Best of Them, and Has Plenty of Grit, Too—How He Brought Order Out of Chaos in the Border Town of Medora.” Remarkably, Roosevelt the future President was quickly becoming the living, breathing prototype for ten thousand later fictional cowboy figures—all tailored to fit the peculiar social environment in which they were created—in a Western industry that would move from dime novels to quality Western literature, to pulp magazines, movies, radio and TV shows.<sup>54</sup>

### **Tough Guy Roosevelt: Masculinity, the Rough Riders and the Frontier Myth**

The social environment of the late nineteenth century, with help from Theodore Roosevelt’s own persona, created the right conditions for establishing masculinity as a key element of the Frontier Myth. Michael Kimmel has observed that Theodore Roosevelt’s transformation from his frailty as an asthmatic youth into a robust, vigorous man “served as a template for a revitalized American social character” and “elevated compulsive masculinity...to the level of national myth.” Just at a moment in history when male gender identity appeared threatened by the closing of the frontier, machine age with its drudge work in the factories, and by soft and cushy urban living, along came TR with his male-centered conquest of the wilderness as a kind of “new ‘safety valve’ or ‘frontier’.”<sup>55</sup> Through self-described accounts including his lengthy cattle drives, story of laying out with one punch a drunk tough who had been waving pistols in a bar, and his

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<sup>54</sup> “Roosevelt, The Typical American,” *Zion’s Herald*, September 11, 1895: 579; *Washington Post*, September 6, 1896, p. 20.

<sup>55</sup> Michael S. Kimmel, *The History of Men: Essays in the History of American and British Masculinities* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005): 82; quotation from H. Green, *Fit for America* (New York: Pantheon, 1986) in *Ibid*.

tracking down of three outlaws who he then forced walked 45 miles to jail, Roosevelt became *the* most popular iconic image of American masculinity. He was the ultimate man's man: a model of "strenuousness" and willpower for American males of all ages to emulate.

Theodore Roosevelt's journey to masculinity was both a personal one and a call for national action. The politician-cowboy escaped "the bugaboos of his own emotional past" by constantly hammering against moral weakness, spineless passivity, and the pampered servants of greed and sloth. One of TR's most influential speeches, aptly entitled "The Strenuous Life," was based on a theme that he would pound home repeatedly. Roosevelt insisted that, as with the ancient Romans, Americans now more than ever needed to reconstruct "a thoroughly manly race—a race of strong, virile character" that would not shrink from the challenges of the new century. Through living out the frontier vision, the moral stagnation of American society could similarly be reversed and its "strenuousness" regenerated by a self-determined effort to live with strength, vigour and determination: every hardship and extra effort would only add value to the test. Characteristically, TR was not just talk: he repeatedly forced himself to do tough and dangerous things. When advised that he had a bad heart and should not climb stairs, Roosevelt scaled the Matterhorn. Out West he claimed that he had encountered the offspring of the frontier first hand and all reports were that he had met the test himself. As a cowboy he was admired by millions of Americans as a role model with steady nerve who repeatedly put himself in mortal danger by standing toe to toe against gun-wielding bullies, Indians, and crooks. As an accomplished hunter, he aggressively pursued, faced, and took down grizzlies, rhinos and other horrible beasts.

When required, the public knew that Roosevelt would fight it out with a rifle or hand and knife against tooth and claw if that was what it took.<sup>56</sup>

The nation's number one frontier-politician faced his ultimate private and public test in 1898. After months of agitating, now Assistant Secretary of the Navy Roosevelt finally got a war with the Spanish in Cuba following the mysterious sinking of the battleship *Maine* in Havana harbor and subsequent outbreak of the Spanish-American War. Having read about warriors all of his life, this was TR's chance in front of all the American public to prove his own courage under fire and himself their equal. When word got out that Roosevelt was looking for volunteers for his own regiment, 23,000 men applied. Roosevelt handpicked 1,000 recruits including cowboys, miners, hunters, Ivy League polo players, ranchers, and a few football players. Cherokees, Chickasaws and Creeks were among the group as well. "All—Easterners and Westerners, Northerners and Southerners," wrote Roosevelt, "officers and men, cow-boys and college graduates, wherever they came from, and whatever their social position—possessed in common the traits of hardihood and a thirst for adventure." Significantly, by de-emphasizing the older Civil War era distinctions of region and promoting cowboy imagery, Roosevelt helped reinforce the idea of the West as a mythic place and "crucible for the idea of a modern unified nation held together by its parts."<sup>57</sup> The watershed event in American history, the Civil War determined for the long haul that the structure of the Frontier Myth and idea of the West itself would of necessity be a national vision as

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<sup>56</sup> "Bugaboos" quote from Kathleen Dalton, "Why America Loved Teddy Roosevelt, or Charisma Is in the Eyes of the Beholders." In Robert J. Brugger, ed., *Our Selves/ Our Past: Psychological Approaches to American History* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981): 275; TR delivered the first of his "Gospel of Strenuousness" speeches to the Hamilton Club in Chicago on April 10, 1899. The complete address was published and is quoted from here in Theodore Roosevelt, *The Strenuous Life: Essays and Addresses*. New York: The Century Co., 1903.

<sup>57</sup> Hal K. Rothman, *Devil's Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1998): 33-35.

opposed to a regional one. It was a particular vision of American unity which would hold for more than a century.

Michael Collins writes that Roosevelt's Rough Rider experience only strengthened TR's own faith in the frontier ethic: "The western values, ideals, and attitudes which had been deeply ingrained in his thinking during the Dakota years seemed reaffirmed by his association with the cowboy regiment." Significantly, TR tells us that the bulk of the First Volunteers regiment hailed from the Southwest: "where the conditions of life are nearest those...on the frontier" and Americans from all regions had chosen to settle. These troops were said to be products of the very seedbed of democracy, a locale where subscribers to the Frontier Myth hoped to find their true identities after sectional conflict and the age of factories and machines had threatened to rob them of it. Turner's new American prototypes, like the frontier itself, were simultaneously touted as superior to the decadent Spanish of Old Europe. The unit's regimental war cry promised to make short order of their backward adversaries: "Rough, tough, we're the stuff, We want to fight and we can't get enough!"<sup>58</sup>

The cowboy image always remained paramount in descriptions of the First Volunteers and Roosevelt chose their uniforms carefully. "In their slouch hats, blue-flannel shirts, brown trousers, leggings, and boots, with handkerchiefs knotted around their necks," wrote TR, "they looked exactly as a body of cow-boy cavalry should look." Roosevelt had his own uniform custom made by Brooks Brothers in New York for a Custer and Codyesque look with a "blue cravennet [*sic*] regular lieutenant-colonel's uniform without yellow on collar, and with leggings." His pearl-handled revolver, spurs

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<sup>58</sup> Collins, *That Damned Cowboy*, 150; Theodore Roosevelt, *The Rough Riders* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925): 19; *Ibid*, 15; War cry quoted in White, *The Eastern Establishment*, 150.

and belt buckle all came from Tiffany's. Though Roosevelt was second in command of the regiment, its commander—Colonel Leonard Wood—seemed to quickly fade into the background for, as the *New York Press* observed, the first in command “is lost sight of entirely in the effulgence of Teethadore.” In no time the First Volunteers became known not as Wood's regiment but as the cowboy “Rough Riders,” the “Roosevelt Rough Riders,” and “Teddy's Terrors.”<sup>59</sup>

Once in Cuba, TR exercised both heroism and considerable recklessness. With bullets flying all around him, TR mounted his horse at every opportunity or stood erect at the front of the line, moving back and forth, and drawing attention to himself in front of his troops. Remarkably through all this he only sustained a “flesh wound” on his wrist and was practically the only Rough Rider in the field who escaped illness of any kind. Gary Gerstle writes that: “In the Cuban Campaign, Roosevelt brought to life the mythic past that he had invented for the American people in *The Winning of the West*.”<sup>60</sup> At San Juan Hill, embedded reporters accounts and newsreels seared Roosevelt's heroic persona into the public mind as his leadership drew exaggerated acclaim.

Popular images of the charge up San Juan Hill had it all wrong factually. In reality, TR had led the charge up Kettle Hill, not San Juan, as the Rough Riders only arrived after San Juan had been captured by the regular army. Unlike the widely accepted images, Roosevelt did not carry a sword, crested the hill without his horse, and by the time his force had reached the summit most of the Spanish had deserted their positions. But none of these details mattered to the public. The press version of the charge seemed

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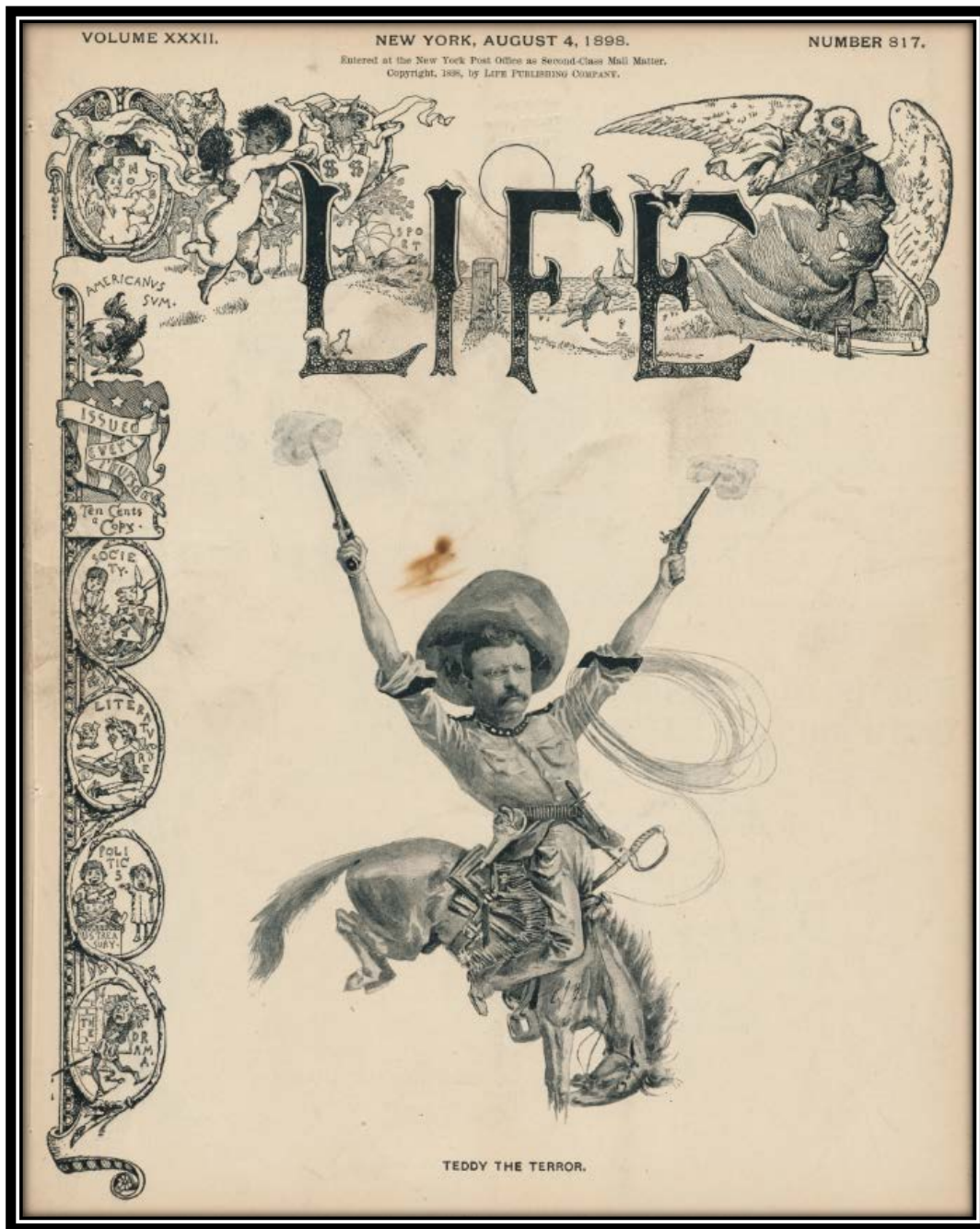
<sup>59</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, *The Rough Riders* (New York: Scribner's, 1925, c1899): 37; Ronald B. Tobias, *Film and the American Moral Vision of Nature* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 2011): 54; *New York Press* quoted in White, *The Eastern Establishment*, 152.

<sup>60</sup> Gary Gerstle, “Theodore Roosevelt and the Divided Character of American Nationalism,” *Journal of American History*, Vol. 86, No. 3 (1999): 1290.

for many to capture the essence of American exceptionalism. As muckraking journalist and TR biographer Jacob Riis recalled after reading the stories of Roosevelt and Company's charge in the paper: "In how many homes was that splendid story read that morning with a thrill never quite to be got over?....We laid down the paper and gave two such rousing cheers in Richmond Hill that fourth of July morning, one for the flag and one for Theodore Roosevelt!" TR had come to embody the belief in the innate superiority and uniqueness of character that had emerged from the American westering experience and now the Rough Riders as a group, and "The Colonel" in particular, found themselves elevated to the level of national icons.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Quotation from Jacob Riis and paraphrasing in this paragraph from Tobias, *Film and the American Moral Vision of Nature*, 57.



**Figure 1.3: “Teddy the Terror,” on the cover of *Life*, August 4, 1898.** (Photo ID - Roosevelt R611.L62, courtesy of the Houghton Library, Harvard University)

The Rough Riders fused the cowboy with the soldier, as personified in Theodore Roosevelt himself. One month before the regiment was mustered out of service, “Teddy the Terror” made the front cover of *Life* magazine. TR in his Rough Rider uniform,

sleeves rolled up atop a bucking bronco, had his six guns blazing. His rise in politics was intertwined with his association as a westerner and a soldier. Less than a week after he took office as New York's Governor, in January 1899, he published the first of six installments of his book *The Rough Riders*, in *Scribner's Magazine*. Roosevelt's account of the war met with criticism from some quarters for having built himself up too much but the book was an immediate popular success and added all the more to the growing cult of TR and the Rough Riders. Together with representations of Roosevelt and "his" Rough Riders in cinema, Buffalo Bill's Wild West shows, in parades, and vaudeville stage, the written accounts created a national fiction which helped carry Roosevelt to the White House.

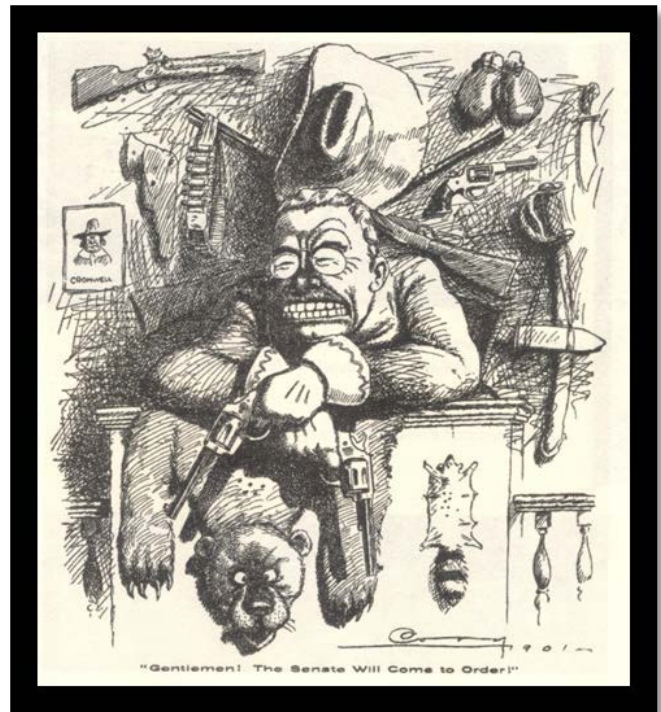
### **Tall in the Saddle**

In just four years, from 1897 to 1901, Roosevelt would rise, in his own words, "like a rocket" from his position as assistant secretary of the navy to the highest public office in the nation. During that period, along with his stint with the Rough Riders, he was elected Governor of New York (1898), Vice President (1900), and then following William McKinley's assassination in September 1901, accidentally became the youngest man ever to serve as President at the age of 42. Though much of the media coverage of TR had been flattering throughout his career, his Vice Presidential nomination was not without considerable controversy. Many Democrats and some within his own party were initially convinced that the "wild" and "maverick" Roosevelt would run amok as Vice President. Kentucky newspaper publisher Henry Watterson feared that TR's cowboy-brain would lead to a dictatorship and reckless imperial adventures. Most famously, a horrified Republican boss Senator Mark Hanna declared: "Don't any of you realize that



there's only one life between this madman and the White House?"<sup>62</sup> And indeed, there was.

Throughout his re-election bid in the 1900 campaign, McKinley appeared in so many respects the perfect image-making foil for Roosevelt. In photographs the President looked old, plain, hesitant, dour and out of shape, while TR was highly animated, aggressive, physical, ready for action, and clearly in his prime. McKinley seemed indecisive while Roosevelt was full of purpose. Roosevelt's dream for a war with Cuba, and his role in it, made him appear the right man for the right war at the right time.



**Figure 1.4: Larger than life VP candidate TR towers in the saddle over a diminutive President William McKinley in this cartoon from the 1900 Campaign (cartoonist unknown)**

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<sup>62</sup> Mark Hanna quoted in Tobias, *Film and the American Moral Vision of Nature*, 61.

**Figure 1.5: VP Roosevelt: “Gentlemen! The Senate Will Come to Order!”** (J. Campbell Cory, *New York World*, March 4, 1901)

In the 1900 Election, McKinley and Roosevelt won a convincing victory over their Democratic opponents William Jennings Bryan and Adlai E. Stevenson. TR quickly became bored with his official, humdrum VP duties, though, and was looking forward to a chance to run in his own right for the Republican nomination the next time around when suddenly McKinley was fallen by an assassin's bullet and TR was thrust into the presidency. Just 42 years old (the youngest president ever), Roosevelt came to the office with an unusual myriad of experience, knowledge and talents and quickly made good on his own trademark phrase to “get action.” Writing to Henry Cabot Lodge, TR confided that “it is a dreadful thing to come to the Presidency this way; but it would be a far worse thing to be morbid about it. Here is the task, and I have to do it to the best of my ability; and that is all there is about it.”<sup>63</sup>

When Mark Hanna learned that McKinley had died, the Senator's worst fears had come true: “Now look! That damned cowboy is President of the United States!” To most Americans at the turn of the century, though, Roosevelt seemed to personify the positive, heroic image of the rugged and masculine cowboy figure of literature and popular culture. And to the disappointment of his opponents (as we shall see in Chapter II) a side of Roosevelt's personality would emerge which few had noticed: caution and tact.

In terms of intellect, Theodore Roosevelt had never been a typical cowman; in fact, he was the most learned of all the presidents since Thomas Jefferson. Roosevelt read

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<sup>63</sup> Roosevelt correspondence to Lodge quoted in John Morton Blum, *The Progressive Presidents: Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon B. Johnson*. (New York: Norton, 1980): 25.

books and articles at high speeds on dozens of subjects, wrote 38 books and well over 100,000 letters, absorbed great literature in six languages, and remembered what he had learned. He was a respected historian, an authority on military and naval warfare, a student of biological sciences, and a critic of writings on the sciences. TR also kept himself informed, knew how to seek out advice, and how to apply it. A cowboy, naturalist, politician, hunter, rancher, police commissioner, explorer and historian, TR was *the* renaissance man of his generation with an apparently never satisfied desire for knowledge and for action. In describing himself as a “literary feller” he assigned himself both high-brow and low-brow status: one that remarkably few Americans could have pulled off successfully in any age and one that helped make the Frontier Myth even more appealing to all classes of Americans. TR the old-wealth Establishment Easterner came to consider himself, in spirit, a bona fide Westerner and most Americans embraced him as such. Likewise his views of the frontier West carried an especially “awful stamp of authenticity” that no other national politician could match since, as TR himself wrote: “I have been part of all that I describe; I have seen things and done them; I have herded my own cattle, I have killed my own food; I have shot bears, captured horse-thieves and ‘stood off’ Indians. The descriptions are literally exact; few Eastern men have seen the wild life for themselves.”<sup>64</sup>

### ***The Virginian and the President***

In 1902, just months after Roosevelt became President, the publication of *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains* by TR’s old friend from his Harvard days, Owen

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<sup>64</sup> Roosevelt correspondence to the editor of *Century*, Richard W. Gilder, quoted in Murdoch, *The American West*, 69.

Wister, catapulted the frontier cowboy hero to immortality by elevating him to the status of icon and literary figure and beyond the status that dime novels could ascribe. The novelist Wister's overall plot involving the heroic cowboy, the Virginian, evil villain, Trampas, and schoolmarm, Molly, would be replayed countless times throughout the twentieth century. Details of the story also recurred relentlessly. Wister's creation of the showdown, the Western gunfight with all its attached rituals—including the villain giving the hero until sunset to leave town—would quickly become part of a larger structure known as 'the code of the West'. David Murdoch observes: "Particularly in *The Virginian*, Wister gave the impression that the chivalry and honour of the cowboy was not merely the expression of an inner purity of spirit, but a well-understood code of behaviour which bound all men in the West—Trampas is a villain not just because he is a rustler, but because he shoots a man in the back."<sup>65</sup> The heroic Virginian, by contrast, was slow to anger but volcanic and invincible when aroused. Even later anti-hero characters were heavily influenced by the details Wister's cowboy epic, with "no name" Virginians appearing in Akira Kurosawa's samurai films and in the Westerns of Sergio Leone. None of these mythic characters would allow themselves to be pushed *too* far. Conservative columnist George F. Will once wrote that *The Virginian* hero's iconic line: "When you call me that, *smile!*" could appear on the seal of the United States.<sup>66</sup>

Like Roosevelt, Wister came from an established eastern family, underwent a neurotic crisis in his youth, and found personal regeneration in the West. His biographer, Gary Scharnhorst, writes that "paradoxically," Wister was a class elitist who

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<sup>65</sup> David Murdoch, *The American West*, 76.

<sup>66</sup> George F. Will, "Barefoot Billionaire: Ross Perot is starring in a cowboy movie, playing the part of Reluctant Sheriff," *Newsweek*, Vol. 119 (June 1, 1992): 78.

created a folk hero.<sup>67</sup> The novelist gave readers of his *Virginian* a near-perfect cultural hero for the Progressive era: a period dominated by aggressive and virile male heroes who were infused with values of both the primitive and the civilized.

TR himself was “deelightful!” with *The Virginian* and had every reason to be. Wister was the first writer to create a Western hero who was noble and chivalrous enough (due, in part, to his Southern origins) to marry a cultured, educated easterner. In doing so he unified the “best” elements of the nation’s supposedly polarized regions. As in TR’s *The Rough Riders*, Wister’s *Virginian* depicts and celebrates the triumph of national unity over the threat from sectionalism. And the novelist’s own eastern heritage enabled him to communicate the frontier experience in a manner that seemed to blend the elements of James Fenimore Cooper and Horatio Alger—values that would resonate with his eastern contemporaries. Roosevelt wrote to his friend “old Brigham Smoot” (TR’s nickname for Wister) that he was “immensely proud of the dedication” of *The Virginian* to the President himself, adding that “I am genuinely proud to be associated with such a work.”<sup>68</sup> And Roosevelt later lent credence to Wister’s romanticized tale when he wrote:

I have sometimes been asked if Wister’s “Virginian” is not overdrawn; why, one of the men I have mentioned...was in all essentials the Virginian in real life, not only in his force but in his charm. Half of the men I worked with or played with and half of the men who soldiered with me afterwards in my regiment might have walked out of Wister’s stories or [Frederic] Remington’s picture.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Gary Scharnhorst, *Owen Wister and the West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015): 4.

<sup>68</sup> Roosevelt to Wister, 29 May 1902, Container 33, Owen Wister Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>69</sup> Roosevelt’s autobiography quoted in Murdoch, *The American West*, 77.

Significantly, Wister's cowman bore a strong resemblance to the new occupant of the White House himself (the book's dedication to President Roosevelt was no coincidence). For many at the turn of the century, TR embodied the rugged, self-reliant, masculine cowboy hero who lived by a code and protected the less fortunate and becoming so prominent in popular literature and culture. Wister's bringing together of all the elements of a classic American morality play also strongly facilitated the President's self-promotion as the nation's first cowboy Chief Executive. Biographer Gary Scharnhorst writes that: "Wister mythologized the western hero as a type of avenging angel who metes out justice. As Larzer Ziff concludes, Wister 'produced a literature fit for the followers of Theodore Roosevelt, leaving his realism to smoulder in his journals while his fiction spoke of other things.'"<sup>70</sup> *The Virginian* also underscored what TR's image represented. "Strenuosity" personified the same types of *national* traits that he advocated and encouraged Americans to lead. For Roosevelt as President, the same courage and strength that his friend Wister had described as characterizing America's frontier horsemen of the Old West, needed be applied to the problems of the modern age.

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<sup>70</sup> Larzer Ziff quoted in Scharnhorst, *Owen Wister and the West*, 144.



**Figure 1.6:** Printed in 1962, illustrator Everett Henry's map entitled "The Virginian from America's First 'Western' Novel, Written by Owen Wister" highlights various scenes from the story. The book struck a responsive chord with readers and critics throughout the twentieth century, and beyond. (Geography & Map Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC)

*The Virginian's* impact would be difficult to overestimate: it is possibly *the* most read novel ever written by an American.<sup>71</sup> Wister's success unleashed a tsunami of westerns, mostly cowboy books that found a huge market while carrying readers deeper and deeper into their belief in the Frontier Myth. Even today, Wister's *Virginian* continues to be received by many Americans (and others) as a highly engaging and

<sup>71</sup> *The Virginian* went through sixteen printings and sold 300,000 copies in its first year. More than 2,000,000 hardcover copies had been sold by 1990 and there is no record of paperback sales. The book was the basis of five feature films and the 1960s TV series starring James Drury and Doug McClure. As the editors of the Time-Life series on the Old West put it, "The Virginian was the archetype that fixed the myth of the West." (Robert Shulman, Introduction to Owen Wister, *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1998], p. vii.). Also see Jane Kuenz, "The Cowboy Businessman and 'The Course of Empire': Owen Wister's *The Virginian*," *Cultural Critique*, Vol. 48 (Spring 2001): 120.



believable personification of their “exceptional” national identity.<sup>72</sup> In the first decade of the twentieth century, Theodore Roosevelt greatly benefitted from its immense success and timely publication.

## Conclusion

With some help from his friends, the new President was poised to be the first occupant of the White House to deploy the Frontier Myth structure not only to foreign and domestic situations (events) but also to specific policy agendas that Roosevelt developed and implemented. TR’s Presidential administration and active years in politics which followed, would represent the first time that the myth became so entrenched as a wide-ranging framework that it could account for the complete range of the American national experience. The symbolism of the frontier seemingly matched historic experience to a “T” (as in Theodore), confirming and strengthening the myth—just as Marshall Sahlins had contended in his work, *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities*. As Brian Dippie explained in *The Vanishing American*, these ideas had consequences as influential Americans accepted these evolving ideas as fact, they applied them to shifting government policies and programs. As the nation’s number one cowboy and commander in chief, Theodore Roosevelt—the myth personified—would now apply those lessons, values and ambitions of the frontier experience to bring significant change to the American political system and society: some to be achieved in the short term and others in the administrations of future presidents. When he took

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<sup>72</sup> For *The Virginian*’s enthusiastic reception among students in contemporary times, see Stanley Corkin, “Cowboys and Free Markets: Post-World War II Westerns and U.S. Hegemony,” *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (Spring 2000): 66-67.



office by accident in 1901, a new century was dawning that would see the Frontier Myth reach the peak of its influence in presidential politics and in American culture.

## II.

### The Progressive Frontiers at Home and Abroad

Theodore Roosevelt...said the spirit of the West was still alive.

He spoke of progress. 'The West stands for growth, for progress. So must the whole American people stand. A great democracy must be progressive or it will cease to be either great or democratic....It must either go forward or back, and it becomes useless if it goes backward.'

He spoke of pioneers. 'As our civilization grows older and more complex...we need a greater and not less development of the fundamental frontier virtues. These virtues include the power of self-help, together with the power of joining with others for mutual help and, what is especially important, the feeling of comradeship and social good-fellowship. Any man who had the good fortune to live among the old frontier conditions must, in looking back, realize how vital was this feeling of general comradeship and social fellowship.'

—*The Washington Post* (1910)<sup>73</sup>

### Introduction

From the time of his Badlands days going forward, Theodore Roosevelt's belief in and adherence to "frontier principles" would remain paramount in both his self-identity and his vision for the nation. As Americans underwent major societal changes at the turn of the century—and with Roosevelt now holding the highest office in the land—the structure of the Myth in terms of presidential politics would be defined with a sense of

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<sup>73</sup> "Cheyenne's Big Day," *The Washington Post*, August 28, 1910: 1; similar sentiments were expressed in Theodore Roosevelt, "The Pioneer Spirit and American Problems," *The Outlook* (September 10, 1910) reprinted in Theodore Roosevelt, *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt. Memorial Edition. Volume XVIII* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925): 23. In the article, though, TR also applies these "pioneer virtues" to foreign policy: in particular, the cruise of the Great White Fleet around the world and the digging of the Panama Canal.

liberal optimism, proactive government, unity and purpose that would dramatically shape the contours of national politics for decades to come.

Roosevelt was not only the first but, arguably, the most fascinating of the Cowboy Presidents because he lived out his life and career with the constant aim of self-improvement and progress. By the end of the nineteenth century, especially after the announcement of the closing of the frontier, Americans strongly desired a cure and healing of their social wounds and the seeming malaise of their condition. They were amazed by what industrialization had achieved but also painfully aware of the fact that it had destroyed a great deal of what they regarded as unique about their nation too. The power of machines and the nature of America's cities left the impression that they had strengthened the country at the price of weakening Americans as a people. The public experienced deep aspirations and anxieties over these changes. This milieu fed the powerful ideas of the Frontier Myth, and with some less than subtle direction from their on-the-spot Frontier President, Americans endeavoured to work through these tensions in an era of rapid change.

### **Pioneer Principles for a New Century**

As discussed in Chapter I, long before Theodore Roosevelt reached the Presidency he had been praising frontiersman and pioneers who spread American institutions and the spirit of freedom. TR himself had become revered for his cowboy image. Now using the "bully pulpit" of the Presidency, he would put this philosophy to action on a broad scale. The message he drilled into a crowd in Colorado Springs was the same as he would deliver across the country. America's frontier pioneers were, he said, "at once the strongest and most liberty-loving among all the people who had been thrust out into

new continents.” He insisted that every American had an obligation in both their public and private lives to serve the principles of the pioneers including loyalty to the United States, bravery, toughness, responsibility, freedom, integrity and fairness. These spirited traits of the Frontier West, Roosevelt contended, were the prescription for the success of any nation.<sup>74</sup> It was an inclusive message of American exceptionalism and hope, steeped in Frontier Myth that rang true in the minds of millions of Americans of his day and would be used again more than half a century later, for different purposes, by fellow “Frontier” Progressive Lyndon Johnson.

John Morton Blum observes that almost from the moment he took office, “Roosevelt yearned to grapple, as no president yet had, with the whole complex political and social agenda of modern industrial society.”<sup>75</sup> Approaching the presidency with the same kind of whoop and enthusiasm he had shown in the Badlands, Roosevelt used the precepts of the Frontier Myth to support his expansion of the presidency and to take on responsibilities that his recent predecessors had not even imagined. TR also kept his mind open on domestic issues most of the time and had the rare ability to grasp and stay ahead of where the nation was moving: positioning himself just a little out in front and pulling the American public along with him. Roosevelt accepted massive corporations as a fact of early twentieth century life but also consistently championed the rights of ordinary Americans against the “Powers that Prey” and their corporate wealth.<sup>76</sup> With a deeper understanding of the wider world than that possessed by most of his contemporaries, some of his most important presidential positions on foreign policy would likewise, arguably, prove ahead of their time. In particular, Roosevelt’s way of

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<sup>74</sup> Theodore Roosevelt’s Address at Colorado Springs quoted in and paraphrased from Rego, *American Ideal*, 124-125.

<sup>75</sup> John Morton Blum, *The Progressive Presidents*, 26.

<sup>76</sup> TR quoted in Rego, *American Ideal*, 57.

thinking about the United States role in world affairs—including its new role as an active power, the need for a close Anglo-American alliance, and use of credible deterrent power—would become what amounted to the conventional wisdom in the mid-twentieth century.

The era of Roosevelt's presidency was a kind of watershed period where the Frontier Myth and presidential politics became inescapably intertwined. But to a greater degree than any other President before or since, what Roosevelt did in the years after he left the White House, also had a dramatic impact on the course of US politics and government in the twentieth century. As political historian Arthur Link once described it, TR's post-presidential "Confession of Faith" at the 1912 Bull Moose Party convention was "a statement of the most advanced thought of the time."<sup>77</sup> A discussion of Theodore Roosevelt's activities and the Frontier Myth during these post-presidential years is thus essential to understanding the relationship between mythic structures and American politics.

### **TR's "Big Stick" Philosophy on the International Stage**

While Assistant Secretary of the Navy in the 1890s, Roosevelt had pushed hard for naval expansion and a greater role for the United States in the Western hemisphere. After he became President these visions came to fruition, most notably: the strengthening of the Navy, securing of the right to build the Panama Canal, successful containment of the Germans and Japanese, and American hegemony in the Caribbean.

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<sup>77</sup> Arthur Link quoted in Natalie A. Naylor, Douglas Brinkley and John Allen Gable. *Theodore Roosevelt: Many-Sided American* (Interlaken NY: Heart of the Lakes Publishing, 1992): 165.

TR's great respect for the skills of the frontiersman and citizen soldier tradition, which he believed came directly out of Americans experience out West, encouraged Roosevelt to reorganize and modernize the military. Relatedly, in his view, perceived evil aggression and insult could only be overcome through strength, courage and preparedness. TR liked to tell the American public that whether on the hunt or alone on the frontier, he had ensured that he was always well armed in the event of trouble. Similarly Roosevelt expected that the US should be able to defend itself and protect its interests in the sometimes dangerous frontier of international politics. In explaining his "speak softly and carry a big stick" philosophy (based on an old African proverb), TR recalled his experiences at law enforcement in North Dakota. In one example, Roosevelt explained: "Years ago I served as a deputy sheriff in the cattle country. Of course I prepared in advance for my job. I carried what was then the best type of revolver, a .45 self-cocker. I was instructed never to use it unless it was absolutely necessary to do so, and I obeyed instructions. But if in the interest of 'peace' it had been proposed to arm me only with a .22 revolver, I would promptly have resigned my job."<sup>78</sup> TR frequently drew such lessons from and analogies between his days on the frontier and projected these into his future vision for international affairs: an approach which had considerable impact in an era when his fellow Americans looked to the Old Frontier for guidance.

Before, during and after his presidency, Roosevelt often asked his fellow Americans to ask themselves, essentially, what would Daniel Boone or Davy Crockett have done? In his writings, TR wanted to revive a frontier spirit both at home and in foreign relations and wrote himself into the ranks of legendary frontier heroes – all

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<sup>78</sup> TR quoted in Duane G. Jundt, "'Never Draw Unless You Mean to Shoot': Theodore Roosevelt's Frontier Diplomacy," *Faculty Publications* [Northwestern College], Volume V, No. 6 (December 2012): 15.

seasoned in the West. His frontier stories were intended to energize modern life, politics and civilization, which TR fully embraced. Roosevelt wrote in the fifth volume of his *Winning of the West* series that those who denied this need for preparedness were “either so ignorant or of such lukewarm patriotism that they do not wish to see the United States prepared for war.”<sup>79</sup> Again readers were asked to ponder how a mountain man or frontiersman would have fared in their ongoing life and death challenges if they too had been similarly unprepared. The Roosevelt Administration’s “big stick” philosophy, along with their head ranchman’s own Western frontier dictum: “Don’t draw unless you mean to shoot,” permeated many aspects of its foreign policy. Roosevelt believed that his experience in the West had taught him how his nation should behave in the international arena and used the myth to promote his foreign policy agenda in response to events of his day. Significantly, as historian H.W. Brands contends: “For all his strenuous life, glory-of-war language, Roosevelt as president conspicuously skirted such opportunities for war as they presented themselves. He fully understood the difference between carrying a big stick and having to use it.”<sup>80</sup> And as will be discussed in later chapters, TR’s approach to world affairs both shaped and was shaped by a liberal and inclusive Frontier Myth structure that would be employed by some of his presidential successors.

### **Roosevelt’s Forward-Looking and Strategic Cowboy Diplomacy**

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<sup>79</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West*, Volume 5, pp. 229-230 quoted in Richard Slotkin, “Nostalgia and Progress: Theodore Roosevelt’s Myth of the Frontier,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 5 (Winter 1981): 629.

<sup>80</sup> H.W. Brands, “Theodore Roosevelt: America’s First Strategic Thinker,” in William N. Tilchin and Charles E. Neu, eds. *Artists of Power: Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Their Enduring Impact on U.S. Foreign Policy* (Westport CN: Praeger Security International, 2006): 38.

Roosevelt went global with his “big stick” and “gospel of strenuosity” when he pushed aggressively for the construction of the Panama Canal in 1903. For a leader so sensitive to the role of naval power and its impact on foreign relations, nothing to his mind could be more important than the linking of the Atlantic to the Pacific—which allowed the American fleet to pass quickly from one coast of the United States to the other. Roosevelt was convinced that “If we are to be a really great people, we must strive in good faith to play a great part in the world....”<sup>81</sup> TR was determined not to allow strategic places in the world to fall into the hands of powers that might undermine American interests. Brands contends that it is for these reasons that he kept a close reign on the Hawaiian Islands, where Japan might be the challenger, and the Caribbean, where Germany was viewed as meddling in the affairs of the Western hemisphere. But while TR advanced important goals in American foreign policy, and at times aggressively so, he was not an advocate of an empire for the sake of having one: apart from some key naval bases and supply stations, as president he had no ambitions for acquiring territory and was even less interested in managing the affairs of others. As Commander-in-Chief, he revealed a side of his personality that would prove indispensable to America’s respect and reputation abroad: caution and tact.

Roosevelt’s levelheadedness and inclination to look forward to future frontiers helped to make him an outstanding strategic thinker with a knack for predicting a number of world upheavals that would occur both during his lifetime and decades after his death. Roosevelt thought deep and hard about strategic affairs. The President’s personal efforts on behalf of security and world peace and his innovative commitment to the idea of a balance of power in the world—something he had advocated for during his

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<sup>81</sup> Roosevelt, *The Strenuous Life*, 9.



lawman days out West—provided a model that would be heavily relied on by his executive office successors in the years following the Second World War. As President, Roosevelt kept America out of war and helped prevent tensions between other nations from escalating into war. As he told one of his closest friends, British diplomat Cecil Spring Rice, “we must trust in the Lord and keep our powder dry and our eyes open.”<sup>82</sup> For TR, the best way to stay out of war was to remain well-prepared for it. By the end of his presidency, the United States had moved up the ladder from the world’s fifth to the second most powerful naval nation—second only to Great Britain.<sup>83</sup> In 1907, the successful and “pioneering” circumnavigation of the globe by the “Great White Fleet” was considered by Roosevelt himself to be his most important contribution to world peace. TR’s views in foreign policy, as in domestic affairs, continued to evolve throughout his lifetime as did the Frontier Myth: he was a man of the twentieth century who took lessons from the frontier past about toughness, and a moral obligation to stop unnecessary wars that did not involve American national interests. Roosevelt looked not only to his past experiences Out West but to new frontiers – believing that American ingenuity and spirit would help propel his nation to world leadership status in the century ahead. And he greatly benefitted (for the most part) from the fact that his cowboy hero persona, sometimes consciously and other times not, helped to achieve his goals along the way.

TR’s cowboy/Rough Rider persona was a potent national and international symbol. When Roosevelt visited the ongoing works at the Panama Canal project in

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<sup>82</sup> Roosevelt quoted in H.W. Brands, “Theodore Roosevelt: America’s First Strategic Thinker,” 41.

<sup>83</sup> Jean M. Yarbrough, “Theodore Roosevelt: Progressive Crusader,” *Makers of American Political Thought Series #3*, September 24, 2012, online at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/09/theodore-roosevelt-progressive-crusader> (accessed 4 February 2016).

November 1906, his own celebrity status as a Western hero was celebrated in Panama City where he was welcomed by “great throngs of people and was escorted to the cathedral steps by a specially organized squad of ‘Panamanian Rough Riders,’ clothed in Rough Rider uniform and mounted upon prancing horses.” The most famous photo of Roosevelt in Panama, on what was the first foreign trip ever taken by a sitting president, showed him having substituted his horse with one of the giant steam shovels at work digging out the Culebra Cut. TR sits as calmly at the controls as he would in the saddle, surveying the work around him. The construction of the Canal, as Michael T. Brown asserts, “marked the triumph of [specifically American] industrial technology over the chaos of the tropics” as “new technological icons emerged that glorified the power of engineering, and Roosevelt was a key part of the process.”<sup>84</sup>

Theodore Roosevelt’s personal fascination and embrace of new technologies became an integral part of his frontier persona and outlook as well. He was the first president to embrace numerous ground-breaking inventions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These included, among other things, putting in an appearance in front of motion picture cameras whenever he was given the opportunity, being submerged in a Naval submarine, and taking to the air without any protective gear in a modified version of the Wright Brothers Flyer. TR was seen by the public as opening up new frontiers for the century ahead. This conflation of the Western myth and intellectual frontiers—joining the past to the future—developed into a peculiar and prominent feature of the twentieth century Frontier Myth that carried on through the age of space flight. TR was repeatedly portrayed through the motion picture camera

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<sup>84</sup> Quotation from author Joseph Bucklin Bishop appears in Michael T. Brown, *Imagining Wilderness, Constructing Landscapes: The Value of Vision in the American West and Tropics, 1821-1914*. PhD dissertation (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2009): 282; *Ibid*, 283.

itself as an adventurous pioneer type who did dangerous things as he led the nation in conquering new challenges in the air above or under the sea. Roosevelt and the Frontier Myth now came to be closely identified not only with earlier generations out West but with innovation and new technologies. Frontier imagery, in this sense, could be compared to the rapid pace of change and Roosevelt could commend Americans for their role in shaping that change and the nation's destiny. In the field of foreign relations, TR liked to identify "the two great feats" of America's technology over the period of his presidency: the sending of the "Great White Fleet" of American battleships around the world on its "peace mission" and the successful digging of the Panama Canal. Both deeds of the nation, Roosevelt wrote in *The Outlook* in 1910, had been made possible by a combination of new knowledge and training combined with the "old virtues." Indeed, TR wrote, "the need for the special and distinctive pioneer virtues is as great as ever."<sup>85</sup> These virtues included many of the same ones that Turner had identified years before along with a new one: the steady determination to "work for the common good, for the advancement of mankind."<sup>86</sup>

At the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco, Franklin E. Lane, Secretary of the Interior, spoke at the opening of the festivities and made this Roosevelt connection between national history and the triumph of technology specific. Lane celebrated the tremendous task of literally moving mountains to build the canal that allowed America to control the seas. Looking forward to the decades ahead he declared that while this frontier adventure may have closed, the spirit of "the sons of the pioneers" would live on: "The long journey of this light figure of the pioneer is at an

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<sup>85</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, "The Pioneer Spirit and American Problems," reprinted in Hagedorn, ed., *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt*, 23.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

end,” Lane told the large crowd, “the waste places of earth have been found and filled, but the adventure is not at an end; the greatest adventure before us, the gigantic adventures of advancing democracy—strong, virile, kindly—and in that advance we shall be the true indestructible spirit of the American pioneer.”<sup>87</sup> The pioneer had thus fulfilled his destiny of settling the frontier west and connecting the continent but the mission continued for, as Michael T. Brown observes, “the spirit of the iconic figure of the pioneer remains, put to use in the ongoing expansion of a powerful nation.”<sup>88</sup> These events related to modernization and technical prowess were thus *mutually* informing. During Roosevelt’s era and in keeping with the contentions of anthropologist Sahlins, they served to strengthen a Frontier Myth as images of the past and hopes for the future reinforced one another.

Significantly, in Roosevelt’s day (and as already suggested), more references were still being made to frontiersmen and pioneers than to the more recent late nineteenth century, western, cowboy hero. Davy Crockett, Daniel Boone and those frontiersmen and tough pioneers who were said to have wrested American civilization out of a savage wilderness remained the most talked about of the frontier heroes across the country. For Roosevelt and his fellow Americans at the outset of the twentieth century, the frontier was not only limited to the West of the late nineteenth century but also included the frontiersmen, mountain men and pioneers of the seventeenth and eighteenth century East, Mid-West, Southwest and Far West. But as we shall see in Chapter III, as the cowboy and gunfighter imagery spring-boarded by president/historian Roosevelt, the artist Remington, author Wister, and showman Buffalo Bill Cody took hold and

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<sup>87</sup> Lane quoted in Elizabeth N. Armstrong, “Hercules and the Muses: Public Art at the Fair.” In Burton Benedict, ed., *The Anthropology of World’s Fairs: San Francisco’s Panama Pacific International Exhibition of 1915* (Berkeley, CA: The Lowie Museum of Anthropology, 1983): 122.

<sup>88</sup> Brown, *Imagining Wilderness*, 302.

expanded into an enormous “Western” industry during the early to mid-twentieth century. As a result, it was this cowboy hero west of the Mississippi that would take center stage and help shape the content and expression of presidential foreign and domestic policies.

From 1901 to 1909, the main elements of the thinking behind Roosevelt’s style of foreign policy not only included security interests but moral obligations: or more precisely, the Myth’s philosophy of exceptionalism. TR, like most of his fellow Americans, believed in his heart that other peoples of the world could not really improve their lot unless they attempted to copy the United States. Historian Norman Graebner comments that “Manifest destiny left a heritage that continued into the twentieth century in the form of American Exceptionalism—a belief that the country had a superior virtue and obligation to correct the world’s ills.”<sup>89</sup> But TR’s application of this principle differed from other presidents who preceded and immediately succeeded him. Roosevelt had a coherent overall strategy to select those areas of the world of vital interest to the United States (including the Western hemisphere, the Pacific and allied nations in Europe) and focused his attentions there—not *everywhere* that seemed to be threatened. In retrospect, Roosevelt’s vision for America’s extended frontier, his overall strategic plan was arguably decades ahead of its time. And as we shall see in later chapters of this study, his successors in the 1940s through the 1960s would rely increasingly on the Frontier Myth to garner support both spiritually and materially for this vision.

### **The Reasonable Cowboy**

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<sup>89</sup> Graebner quoted in *Ibid*, 25.

The hawkish view of Roosevelt as President, popular among historians, stems from his substantive build-up and modernization of the American military, his interventionism in the Caribbean and Central America, and his plethora of public pronouncements about national strength and the need for global influence of America's new great power status. But like a few political cartoonists of his day (see L.C. Gregg's 1904 cartoon in Figure 2.1, below), some scholars of diplomacy have had a tendency to *overplay* TR's role as a warrior, especially in the years following his Rough Rider days. Thomas Bailey, for example, characterized Roosevelt as "an apostle of Mars" in his classic, *A Diplomatic History of the American People*.<sup>90</sup> On occasion while in the White House, TR would show flashes of his loud and bullying rhetoric—but for the most part, this dissertation contends that he displayed rare talent for complex and sophisticated strategic thought and devoted much of his energies toward maintaining the peace. The American public, after all, was benefitting substantially from the status quo of the early twentieth century. At the same time they recognized their nation's new role as a leading player in world affairs. In this milieu, TR established a kind of model and plan for future presidents which confirmed America's coming-of-age in the arena of foreign policy.

The Frontier Myth of Roosevelt's presidential years was a forward looking phenomenon and as the nation's number one personification of this myth, TR concurrently was a future leaning, twentieth-century man. His enthusiasm for foreign ventures and imperialism waned after he entered the White House. But President TR, in keeping with the emerging liberal Myth of his day, still showed a strong willingness to

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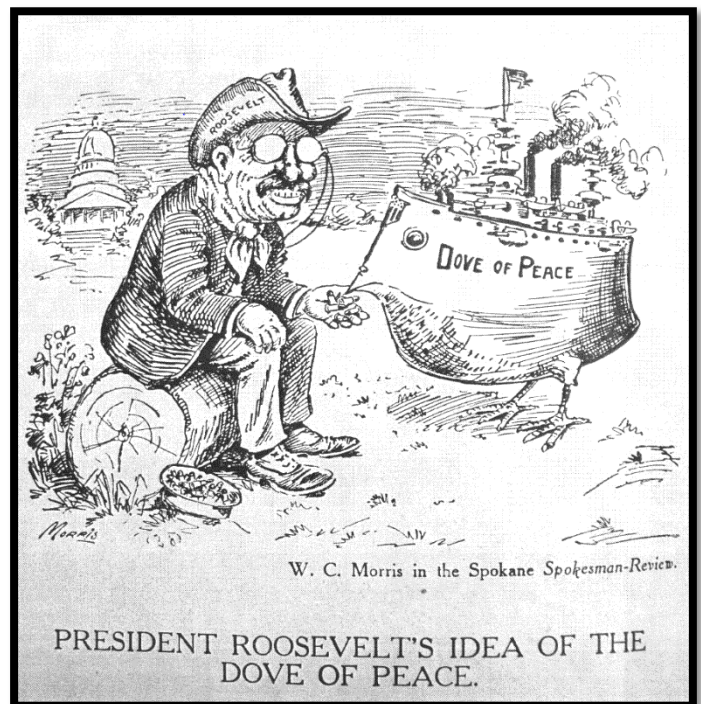
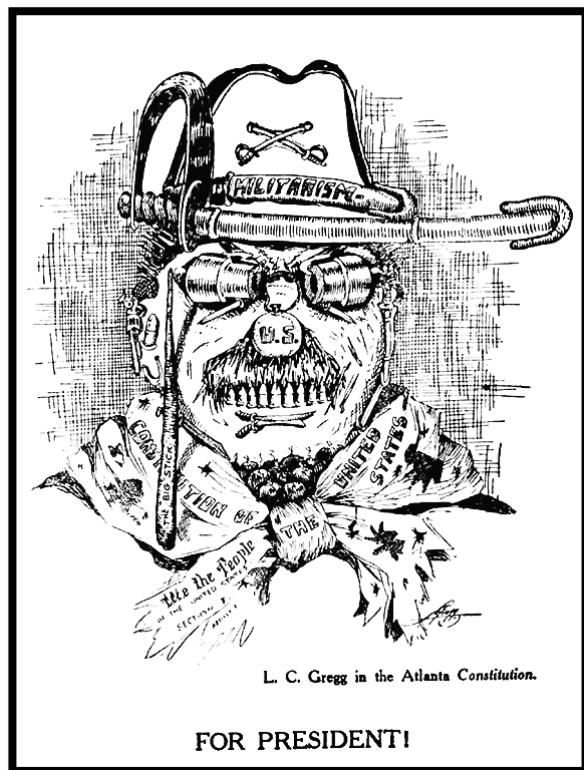
<sup>90</sup> Thomas A. Bailey. *A Diplomatic History of the American People*. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974): 527. Elsewhere, Bailey charged Roosevelt with "almost pathological bellicosity." See Thomas A. Bailey, *Presidential Greatness: The Image and the Man from George Washington to the Present* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1966): 307. For the classic warlike depiction of President TR also see Henry F. Pringle, *Theodore Roosevelt: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1956).

commit resources and deploy government influence against perceived threats and in support of vital interests—including those within the United States (such as corporate corruption) and from outside. In the arena of foreign affairs, he would now rely not only military “muscle” but on a judicious blending with informed and strategic diplomacy.

The liberal Frontier Myth and Roosevelt’s promotion and pursuit of internationalism was in direct contrast to that of his political opponents in the more reactionary Democratic Party of William Jennings Bryan *and* the later, conservative GOP of the 1930s and early 1940s—which by then had reoriented itself as the party of isolationism. “Theodore Rex’s”<sup>91</sup> active involvement in international affairs (a policy later revived by the failure of appeasement in Europe and the outbreak of World War II), creation of a credible deterrent power, and efforts to solidify and Anglo-American alliance. All became key foundations of American foreign policy from 1945 onward.

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<sup>91</sup> Nickname bestowed upon Roosevelt and the title of the widely read biography: Edmund Morris, *Theodore Rex* (New York: Random House, 2002).



**Figure 2.1: “For President!” TR as fanatic militarist. A view held over in large part from his pre-presidential years (L.C. Gregg, *Atlanta Constitution*, 1904).**

**Figure 2.2: TR’s Great White Fleet of 1907-1909 as “President Roosevelt’s Idea of the Dove of Peace” (W.C. Morris, *Spokane Spokesman-Review*). According to TR, every nation had accepted the cruise of the American battle fleet around the world as “proof that we were not only desirous ourselves to keep peace, but able to prevent the peace being broken at our expense.”<sup>92</sup>**

Today, the phrase “Cowboy diplomacy” has taken on connotations of international bullying and recklessness but in his day Roosevelt’s style of diplomacy was much more sophisticated and diversified. Brands has argued persuasively that Roosevelt has to be ranked right at the top of the presidents as a strategic thinker.<sup>93</sup> Perhaps the exercise of power had a softening influence on Roosevelt. Having purged himself of the need to

<sup>92</sup> Morris cartoon reprinted in Raymond Gros, ed., *T.R. in Cartoon* (New York: Saalfield Publishing Company, 1910): 198; Roosevelt, “The Pioneer Spirit and American Problems,” reprinted in Hagedorn, ed., *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt*, 24.

<sup>93</sup> Paraphrased from Brands, H.W. “Theodore Roosevelt: America’s First Strategic Thinker,” 33-44.



prove his manhood after the stint with the Rough Riders in Cuba, TR as President seemed much less prone to speaking the language of a warmonger. Roosevelt was far more reflective and cautious when he spoke for the United States as its President than when he spoke merely for himself. As contended earlier in this chapter, he carried a big stick but usually spoke softly as a reasonable cowboy who preferred not to use force unless American interests were seen as directly threatened.<sup>94</sup> TR, the former ardent imperialist, now turned his attention to building up a strong defense at home and dropped the idea of further expansion. By 1907, he even came to believe that the US would be better off getting out of the Philippines (America's "Achilles heel" in Roosevelt's thinking) and that its annexation had been a mistake. Three years later he called for the creation of a League of Peace. Like the best of the twentieth century's cowboy heroes, TR had an impressive range of personal skills and tools at his disposal to achieve his nation's objectives and to get the job done.

Perhaps the best known example of the cautious Roosevelt was his mediation of the Russo-Japanese War for which he was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize on December 10, 1906. This peacemaker role for Roosevelt seems especially significant as it provides a window into his wider thinking by the time he had entered the presidency. To prevent the Japanese from becoming too powerful and to keep some semblance of a balance of power in northeast Asia, TR made use of the presidency to act as a mediator between Japan and Russia. It was tricky business for as he told his son Kermit: "I am having my hair turned gray by dealing with the Russian and Japanese peace negotiators. The Japanese ask too much...but the Russians are ten times worse than the Japs because they are so stupid and won't tell the truth." Eventually, though, he convinced the

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<sup>94</sup> Brands, "Theodore Roosevelt: America's First Strategic Thinker," 38.

Russians to face reality and the Japanese to tame their demands. The resulting Treaty of Portsmouth kept Japanese expansion in check without requiring the use of American gunplay and won Roosevelt international recognition as a reasonable, even “peacemaking” cowboy. Increasingly the Frontier Myth was establishing itself in the world of foreign relations as a phenomenon where a cowboy president could use his diplomatic skills to rope in international “yahoos” and was not limited to employing his shotgun or revolver.<sup>95</sup> In a similar vain to his domestic policies, the maturing TR was willing to listen and to make an effort to understand others across their cultural and political differences: to explore new frontiers in the arena of ideas. As the first American to win a Nobel Peace Prize, he also helped the United States to gain greater respect and leverage among foreign nations.

### **The Frontiers of Race, Gender and Inclusiveness**

Richard White, Patricia Limerick and the “new western” historians have chastised both Theodore Roosevelt and Frederick Jackson Turner as the foremost proponents of Anglo-American settlement on the continent. Both men, in Limerick’s words, believed that the frontier was “where white people got scarce, or alternatively, where white people got scared.”<sup>96</sup> These New West historians, writes Douglas Brinkley, contend that Roosevelt treated Native tribes, Spanish settlers, and even French Canadians as “riffraff who needed to be cleared away like so many weeds.”<sup>97</sup> Anglo-Saxon frontiersmen, on the other hand, could seemingly do no wrong. At best, they assert, the Natives in *The*

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<sup>95</sup> Theodore Roosevelt to Kermit Roosevelt, correspondence of August 25, 1905 in Morison, Elting E., ed., *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, Volume 4 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951): 1316-1317.

<sup>96</sup> Patricia Limerick, “The Forest Reserves and the Argument for a Closing Frontier,” in *The Origins of the National Forests* (Durham, NC: Forest History Society, 1992): 13.

<sup>97</sup> Brinkley, *The Wilderness Warrior*, 243.

*Winning of the West* were portrayed as noble savages. White, Limerick and Company are correct to point out that Roosevelt's early ethnocentrism was a widely accepted aspect of the late nineteenth century Social Darwinism. Part of his narrowness was no doubt part of a larger American response to the greater number of immigrants from an increasingly mixed array of ethnic groups who immigrated into the country in the 1880s and 1890s. But as Kathleen Dalton's excellent study has convincingly argued, as years passed TR took on a more liberal and compassionate view towards race, class and gender issues than the New West historians have given him credit for. Dalton and other scholars such as Elliot West, have brought perspective to the studies of TR.<sup>98</sup> Over time, an array of his youthful prejudices faded and even disappeared and Roosevelt's ideas about other demographic groups became more complex and experienced.

TR's attitudes about race were flexible and evolved into much more sympathetic and inclusive views with each passing decade. As Thomas G. Dyer explains in his comprehensive study, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Idea of Race*, by the early twentieth century, the learned President now insisted "that if he were to rewrite his histories he would use neither the terms *Scotch-Irish* nor *Anglo-Saxon*" as he had done frequently in *The Winning of the West*.<sup>99</sup> TR was also "very doubtful" that such thing as an "Aryan" race had ever existed.<sup>100</sup> Though he had once viewed blacks as hopelessly inferior and

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<sup>98</sup> Kathleen Dalton, *Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002); and Elliot West, "Roosevelt's West," Keynote Address at the Theodore Roosevelt Symposium 2011, October 27, 2011, Dickinson State University, Dickinson, North Dakota, online: <<http://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/Get-Involved/Events/2011-Theodore-Roosevelt-Symposium.aspx>> (accessed 30 March 2012).

<sup>99</sup> Thomas G. Dyer, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Idea of Race* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980): 67.

<sup>100</sup> TR quoted in *Ibid*.

supported some immigration restriction gimmicks, later in life the tenets of scientific racism made him ill.<sup>101</sup>

By the time he had become president, Roosevelt was much more interested in fully integrating Native Americans, African-Americans and other minorities into the fabric of national life than in armchair eugenics. His own account of the Rough Riders, a founding document that helped shape and was shaped by turn-of-the-century Frontier Myth, is in large part the story of how a group of individuals overcame their wide ranging differences to work together as one united unit with a similar purpose: to liberate the persecuted Cubans. And these Riders, he pointed out, were made up of whites, blacks, American Indians, cowboys, farmers, and soldiers from all regions of the country. TR showered praise on Native American members of the Rough Riders and stated (though very paternalistically) that some Native communities were now worthy of “absolute equality with our citizens of white blood.”<sup>102</sup> No longer viewed as a threat or obstacle to progress, Roosevelt wanted to welcome and embrace Native Americans as part of the broader mix of the American nation: provided it was on terms that he perceived would strengthen rather than weaken national unity. Meanwhile TR’s well-known invitation of Booker T. Washington, founder of the Tuskegee Institute, for dinner in 1904 had made him the first president to entertain a black man in the White House. Roosevelt claimed that he did not know any single white Southerner who was as decent a man as his friend Washington. TR also appointed several accomplished blacks to substantive federal offices. Many white Southerners were livid, viewing these actions and associations as a direct challenge to Jim Crow. One South Carolina appointment

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<sup>101</sup>See Dalton, *Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life*, 522.

<sup>102</sup> Theodore Roosevelt quoted in Dyer, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Idea of Race*, 83.

that sparked considerable controversy prompted Roosevelt to reply in his correspondence: “I cannot consent to take the position that the door of hope—the door of opportunity—is to be shut upon any man, no matter how worthy, purely upon the grounds of race or color. Such an attitude would, according to my convictions, be fundamentally wrong.”<sup>103</sup>

Roosevelt did not completely escape the racism of his times, though, and measured by today’s terms stumbled badly at least twice in his presidential and post-presidential years. On one occasion in 1906, TR ordered that all the men of a black regiment be discharged without trial after a white bartender was killed in an allegedly wild midnight raid in Brownsville, Texas. Then, six years later and for reasons of political expediency, he relented to Southern delegates’ insistence that black delegates should not be seated at the “lily white” 1912 Progressive Party Convention. TR’s critics were given plenty of ammunition here and used it with some effectiveness.

But despite these two inconsistencies, Roosevelt was not the one-dimensional, bombastic racist that some “New West” scholars have portrayed. As President, TR’s views fit closely with those of his friend Booker T. Washington. Historian John Gable explains that “Roosevelt did not think that any race was inherently or biologically inferior to any other. But he was anthropologically and philosophically provincial in his views of culture and ‘civilization.’”<sup>104</sup> At odds with his three close friends Henry Cabot Lodge, Owen Wister and Frederic Remington—who each longed for a purely Anglo-Saxon nation—TR came to celebrate hybridity among race, especially between Native Americans and whites. As President, he asserted that individuals needed to be judged on

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<sup>103</sup> Theodore Roosevelt to James Adger Smyth, November 26, 1902, in Elting Morison, ed., *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, Vol. 3 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951): 384.

<sup>104</sup> Historian John Gable quoted in Max J. Skidmore, “Theodore Roosevelt on Race and Gender,” *Journal of American Culture*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (1998): 42.

their abilities and nothing else, preached broad-mindedness, and encouraged Americans to put away their regional differences. The maturing Roosevelt came to possess a deep and abiding faith in the power of simply living in America to break down all racial and ethnic barriers and to produce a kind of common American identity. Roosevelt moved about as far away from the racism of his day as one could and helped carry the increasingly liberal Frontier Myth with him: embracing the idea of the “Melting Pot” years before Israel Zangwill even coined the phrase for his 1912 play which was aptly dedicated to TR.

Roosevelt’s thoughts on race and on the need for a unified nation based on the frontier virtues were revealed vividly in his speeches and correspondence. Conservationist and Aryan supremacist Madison Grant, who Theodore Roosevelt corresponded with for many years, once wrote to TR about a man who claimed he could demonstrate with evidence that men from white, old-stock American units of New England and the South fought better than other races in the First World War. Blacks and the “lower races” this gent reported, “cannot stand the strain of the war.”<sup>105</sup> But Roosevelt would have none of this and called that man “an addleheaded ass and the alternative is worse.” TR responded that one’s ethnicity made no difference since men of foreign backgrounds from around the country, including Jews, fought well. Region was also irrelevant to Roosevelt: “I don’t for one moment believe that they are better than the men from the western and middle Pacific Coast States. They are *all* fine.” For TR, regardless of race or region, all Americans who had a spark of Galahad or of the

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<sup>105</sup> Madison Grant memorandum to TR, October 15, 1918 in the Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Library of Congress, Washington DC, Series 1, October 9-15, 1918, Shelf No. 13,869, Reel 295.

frontiersman did their part in the war, fighting against the “unendurable” trait of “race prejudice” found among their German enemies.<sup>106</sup>

Roosevelt had once bought fully into the late-nineteenth century racism that in time would spawn a resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s. But TR, like some of his other fellow countrymen and women, had seen the patriotic support of blacks with the Rough Riders in Cuba and later in the First World War and this appears to have enabled him to accept racial equality and repudiate racists like Madison Grant. His initially harsh descriptions of Native Americans had softened during his presidential years as well. According to historian Thomas G. Dyer, this was all part of TR’s “growing sense of social justice and reform.”<sup>107</sup> Again, Roosevelt seemed to be able to see beyond the bigotry of his own time and major events, the World Wars in particular, helped broaden the parameters of the national Frontier Myth itself, making it generally more inclusive. Further, it was one’s character, rather than race, which made them a success or failure in the wilderness and in modern American life. By the time of his presidency, Roosevelt sought to pull the nation together and though he was not, even with the changing parameters of the myth, able to overcome the barriers to judging individuals based on merit, he did strongly deliver a new message at the dawn of the twentieth century that inclusion and equality were a key cornerstone of national unity. In the quest for a unique and uniform American culture, based on the equalizing frontier experience, Roosevelt utterly rejected ethnic “hyphenation.”<sup>108</sup> It could even be argued that the integrationist dreams of Martin Luther King and future Frontier President Lyndon

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<sup>106</sup> TR correspondence to Madison Grant, December 30, 1918, reprinted in Elting E. Morison, *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt, Vol. 8* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954): 1419.

<sup>107</sup> Thomas G. Dyer, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Idea of Race*, 86.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*, 133.

Baines Johnson grew out of the same source of civic nationalism that TR and others were advocating at the outset of the twentieth century.

Race and region were not the only inclusiveness issues to engage Roosevelt. On the issue of gender politics, TR was the first prominent male political figure to openly endorse nationwide women's suffrage. Though he had tended to avoid the suffrage issue during his Presidency, in 1912 he waded into the issue and, in his autobiography published the following year, referred to himself as a "zealous supporter" of women's suffrage. But how could this symbol of frontier masculinity help lead the charge for women's rights? Historian Arnaldo Testi contends that TR's deference to women's politics and social reform was possible not despite his cowboy machismo but *because* of it: no one could accuse Rough Rider, ranchman Roosevelt of being an effeminate reformer.<sup>109</sup>

### **"The Cult of the Wild": Conservation Policy and the Power of the Changing Frontier Myth**

Coinciding but not coincidental to Theodore Roosevelt's presidency, a "Cult of the Wild" emerged in the early twentieth century as a celebration of wilderness and the frontier. This cult-like phenomenon grew in opposition to the material occupation of an increasing regimented and industrialized society. For the first time, the idea of a vanishing, unspoiled wilderness was looked upon by a wide range of Americans with regret. The "Wilderness Cult" was inspired by John Muir, Aldo Leopold, et al, and committed to protecting the wilderness and promoting those frontier values which its

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<sup>109</sup> Arnaldo Testi, "The Gender of Reform Politics: Theodore Roosevelt and the Politics of Masculinity," *Journal of American History*, Vol. 81, No. 4 (March 1995): 1530.



members believed had made America great. Muir, an original founder of the Sierra Club, acted as a kind of publicizer, a person who echoed the ideas of Henry David Thoreau and in the changing context of the times was able to articulate and promote them with an enthusiasm that drew widespread attention. Even Owen Wister got into the act. In *The Virginian*, the novelist reveals that he was sickened by the piles of trash that littered the Western frontier. The narrator describes “the empty sardine box...rusting over the face of the Western earth” and the “thick heaps and fringes of tin cans, and shelving mounds of bottles cast out of the saloons: on ‘the ramparts of Medicine Bow.’”<sup>110</sup> President Roosevelt’s belief that contact with wilderness would help the country rid itself of “flabbiness” and “slothful ease” was also influential.<sup>111</sup> With irony Roderick Nash observes in *Wilderness and the American Mind*, that enthusiasm for the wilderness began in the cities, not in the wilds, and that this appreciation increased as the nation’s pioneer past receded and came to rely on it less—with the “wilderness cult” emerging just as Turner lamented that the frontier was vanishing.<sup>112</sup>

In his recent work, *The Wilderness Warrior: Theodore Roosevelt and the Crusade for America* (2009), historian Douglas Brinkley contends that both the changing values of the times and Theodore Roosevelt’s exposure to natural wonders in his early life also shaped his environmental values and policies as president. Changes in values at the turn of the century brought about changes in thinking about the frontier that would again directly and substantively influence presidential policy decisions. While in office, TR set aside five times more lands to create federal parks than all of his presidential predecessors combined: establishing the first five national parks, 51 wildlife refuges, 18

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<sup>110</sup> Quotations from *The Virginian* appear in Scharnhorst, *Owen Wister and the West*, 219.

<sup>111</sup> TR quoted Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967): 150.

<sup>112</sup> See *Ibid.*

national monuments, four national game preserves and 21 national federal reclamation projects. During Roosevelt's years in office, US forest reserves shot up from about 43 million acres to 194 million acres: an area larger than the combined land mass of France, Belgium and the Netherlands.<sup>113</sup> Centralization of national resources into the hands of the national government, rather than business and private interests, was key to this process. All along Roosevelt, with some irony (given his well-known hunting exploits), cast the frontiersman as one who used the environment wisely. TR emphasized a Frontier Myth where its finite nature was tied directly to economic opportunity while, at the same time, he tended to deemphasize its value for business interests in favour of its spiritual value. Conservation of the remaining American wilderness frontier did more than just help secure the nation's economic future: it provided the opportunity for regenerating the American spirit.

As President, TR not only perpetuated the myths and symbols of the Frontier Myth he helped adjust and reshape the emphasis of those myths as well. As a rancher, he had foreseen the risks of overgrazing while also developing a strong desire to protect public lands for the benefit of everyone rather than only the privileged classes. Now the frontier would not merely be a source of wealth but become a key means for achieving wilderness conservation. As William Cronon observes, "In the myth of the vanishing frontier lay the seeds of wilderness preservation in the United States, for if the wild land had been so crucial in the making of the nation, then surely one must save its last remnants as monuments to the American past—and as an insurance policy to protect its future."<sup>114</sup> By the dawn of the twentieth century, the wild frontier out West was

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<sup>113</sup>Brinkley, *The Wilderness Warrior*, 46.

<sup>114</sup> William Cronon quoted in Brown, *Imagining Wilderness*, 11.

becoming increasingly appreciated not only for its resource value but as a scarce site of national identity formation. After all, for Roosevelt, Turner and other promoters of the Myth, the frontier process had been *the* crucial experience that had enabled Americans to forge their unique, democratic national identity. The rapid urbanization and industrialization of the United States appeared to them and to millions of Americans to threaten all of this. Manliness, vigour, and strength could only be maintained by helping preserve those national spaces where the story could be lived out.

Fittingly then, in his first annual presidential message to Congress in December 1901, TR clearly set out his conservation agenda with an emphasis on its democratic incentives. “The forest reserves should be set apart forever,” Roosevelt declared, “for the use and benefit of our people as a whole and not sacrificed to the shortsighted greed of a few.”<sup>115</sup> Conserving nature and making it available to all citizens for rest and recreation was not only vital because it provided them a break away from the anxieties of the urban, industrial life but also because by implication it strengthened democracy. Valuing the wilderness as the nation’s main source of masculine vigor and democratic fortification made its preservation a matter of national health. For more than a decade, TR had been a key figure in promoting the Cult of the Wild which tapped directly into this concept: contact with (and relatedly protection of) the wilderness would help America rid itself of its perceived “flabbiness” and “slothful ease.”<sup>116</sup> As a result, TR’s version of the myth dictated that it was vital to provide all classes of Americans space to experience the frontier. The Boone and Crockett Club had been part of this effort to save wilderness so that the Frontier Myth could be perpetuated and new stories of frontier

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<sup>115</sup> Theodore Roosevelt: “First Annual Message,” December 3, 1901. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29542> (accessed 14 June 2012).

<sup>116</sup> TR quoted Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 150.

adventure told. Now Roosevelt wanted to broaden this opportunity to all Americans regardless of class.

With the successful implementation of the Antiquities Act (1906) in his second term Roosevelt became more proactive and more dangerous to western developers, oil interests, and railroad companies than ever. The first “green” President even used his attire to deploy America’s most powerful myth in the service of wilderness protection. Brinkley describes how TR typically wore a Stetson with a bandana around his neck, and filled his public speeches with cowboy talk, Indian words, and western place names seldom heard in the east. Using his bully pulpit in Washington, he cast himself as a Rocky Mountain westerner to help promote his radical conservationism. His Western symbolism was not only intended to represent a region but the entire nation. After all, America had initially been *all* frontier and this, so went the implication, had provided for a unique American past and national identity. Powerful business interests who saw these ideas as a direct threat to their own profits, along with political allies of the timber industry became enraged at Cowboy TR. Republican Senator Charles Fulton of Oregon and others in Congress believed the entire Antiquities Act was nonsense and were fed up with executive orders that gave priority to spotted owls and petrified wood over corporate profit. But their anger only emboldened Roosevelt. On March 2, 1907, TR created 32 new forest reserves overnight catching Congress off-guard and delivering a devastating counterthrust to those promoting states’ rights. It was perhaps the boldest example of Roosevelt’s “unappeasable conservationism.”<sup>117</sup> According to Fulton, TR and Pinchot had sneakily withdrawn 16 million acres. “Why didn’t Roosevelt burn the

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<sup>117</sup> Paraphrased and quotation from Brinkley, *The Wilderness Warrior*, 676-677.

Constitution while he was at it?" some business interests asked.<sup>118</sup> But TR later boasted about his success in *An Autobiography*: "The opponents of the Forest Reserve turned handsprings in their wrath; and dire were their threats against the Executive: but the threats could not be carried out, and were really only a tribute to the efficiency of our action."<sup>119</sup>

Just before leaving office in 1909, Roosevelt once again described the need to adhere to frontier conservation. He told a joint session of Congress that "it is irrefutable proof that the conservation of our resources is the fundamental question before this Nation, and that our first and greatest task is to set our house in order and to begin to live within our means." Roosevelt added that he urged "where the facts are known, where the public interest is clear, that neither indifference and inertia, nor adverse private interests, shall be allowed to stand in the way of the public good....It is high time to realize that our responsibility to the coming millions is like that of parents to their children, and that in wasting our resources we are wronging our descendants."<sup>120</sup> The American Frontier was not the limitless bonanza that some corporate interests had claimed: now conservation would be necessary to allow America's uniqueness, its exceptionalism, to be maintained long into the future. These areas, he said, would also serve as a refuge from the problems of tyranny and corruption caused by those same individuals who wanted America's sacred places exploited in the service of profit and greed. Americans had overcome the deadly challenges of the frontier experience but now needed to protect those same untamed wilds out West so that they could maintain

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<sup>118</sup> Constitution question quoted in *Ibid*, 679.

<sup>119</sup> TR quoted in *Ibid*.

<sup>120</sup> Theodore Roosevelt: "Special Message", January 22, 1909. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=69658> (accessed 14 June 2012).

the frontier “edge” required to meet and conquer any problem or challenge that faced the nation far into the future.



**Figure 2.3: President Roosevelt and John Muir—two frontier heroes—perched on the edge of a cliff at Yosemite Valley in commemoration of their much talked about camping trip in May 1903. The confident TR, in his riding boots, looks as if he might be reaching for a weapon while the shrewd Muir looks off to the side with his hands positioned humbly behind his back. (Underwood and Underwood, Accession Number: #LC-USZC4-4698, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC)**

As in so many other aspects of his presidency TR was operating on the precepts of a forward-thinking Frontier Myth. In this way, Roosevelt had laid the foundation for LBJ’s “New Conservationism” program of the 1960s and promoted the idea of

sustainability almost a century before the idea came into fashion during the Bill Clinton administration. TR was essentially promoting an agenda of closing much of the western frontier to settlement and development and wanted tough laws to throw poachers and the like in the slammer.

But scholars and pundits have often pointed out a glaring irony in all of this too. Until his death, TR could not seem to match up his understanding of the need to respect and protect nature from greedy business interests, with his own personal drive to kill it as a hunter. During some of his African safaris later in his life, Roosevelt killed thousands of animals (Figure 2.4). The hunter was part of the old Frontier Mythology which Roosevelt would not let go of and remained key to his self-image as a self-reliant and masculine individual. Detractors of TR, in particular William Randolph Hearst, delighted in this fact so much that his papers released dozens of political cartoons pointing out the paradox; these barbs even became the basis of a comedy motion picture entitled *Terrible Teddy, the Grizzly King* (1901).<sup>121</sup> But most Americans continued to *like* this image and Roosevelt himself continued to publish stories of his hunting exploits.

The Frontier Myth in its early manifestations contained both conservationist and resource exploitation elements. The myth was flexible and existed on a spectrum. As its structure was challenged by events these activities could sometimes be still subsumed by the myth but at other times the myth's structures themselves were forced to change and adapt. Over time a growing acknowledgement among the President and that American public that the over-exploitation of western lands and frontier resources could rob future generations of their unique, national heritage caused key aspects of the structure

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<sup>121</sup> *Terrible Teddy, the Grizzly King* (1901), Dir. Edwin S. Porter, Edison Manufacturing Company.

to be changed. But during Roosevelt's time, substantive conservation policies and government intervention to protect wildlands initiated by Roosevelt's administration, *and* on a personal level, Roosevelt's participation in events that only seemed to degrade these spaces (including his own hunting expeditions) all continued to exist side by side and to be subsumed by a Frontier Myth which still saw merit and explanations for both protecting the vanishing wilderness and the manly, character building activities of the hunt. The seeming dichotomy would not disappear anytime soon either—as we shall observe upon encountering our second liberal Cowboy President, LBJ.





**Figure 2.4: “The Roosevelt Big Game Specimens Sent to the Smithsonian Institution.” The results of Roosevelt’s African trip, 1909-1910, with the initials “TR” painted on every piece, sometimes twice. (Photograph by Paul Thompson, New York, c1910).<sup>122</sup>**

## **A “Square Deal” and Sense of Community**

The Frontier Myth, changes to American society, and Roosevelt’s own experiences out West had instilled in the President a strong faith in progress, a preference for a strong federal government as protector of both national interests and the poor and downtrodden over a laissez faire sectional one, and a view of the need to balance individualism out with a broader communal awareness and concern. The myths of the Old West had arisen in American society partly as a response to massive industrialization and concentrations of wealth which Roosevelt and millions of other Americans viewed as having strengthened the forces of evil in the world. By the late nineteenth century, an increasing number of Americans—including a rapidly growing middle class—were rejecting the conventional post-bellum theory that government should stay out of business and that individuals left to their own discretion would act in the public’s interest. Now there was a growing sense of a vital public interest its own right and that this interest was in need of protection from the growing corruption and greed of large corporations. Along with many others, Roosevelt was caught up in these changing ideas about the nation. In *The Winning of the West*, explored in the last chapter, TR recognized the need for rugged individualism to be reined in by a larger communal concern. An individual’s success, as Turner had articulated, depended on their self-reliance, a masterful grasp of material things, know-how, and the like; but frontiersman Roosevelt came increasingly to believe that society also needed to provide

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<sup>122</sup> Photograph by Paul Thompson appears in Charles Morris, *The Marvelous Career of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: John C. Winston, 1910): page not numbered.

a more level playing field—or equality of opportunity—by taking away economic obstacles and protecting individuals from the gross misconduct and exploitations of others. By acting collectively through the Federal Government, American citizens could play a positive role in that evolution and in maintaining a balance of power in society. Merit should be rewarded but Roosevelt also wanted everyone running the race on fair terms. Cowboy toughness, honesty, courage, energy and self-reliance would combine with compassion and service to others to create a healthy and vigorous nation. TR, then, came not to see individual effort and government control as mutually exclusive rather he asserted that a powerful federal government would need to intervene in order for individuals to experience the kind of personal freedom that they could not have if left on their own.

During his first term in office, Roosevelt's "Square Deal" became the title of his presidential program. Here the President was not just talking about playing fair, he wanted the rules of the game changed. TR would make full use of his bully pulpit to shape the national agenda for change, invigorate the federal government by attracting many of the best and the brightest bureaucrats in the nation, and set up an innovative, action-oriented federal government that would intervene on behalf of individual citizens to defend their interests and promote new rights. In terms of the latter, conservation of natural resources, control of corporations and consumer protection were highest on TR's list. This trail blazing by the first of the Frontier presidents was all part of his role in the creation of the modern presidency that would reshape the landscape of American politics and government far into the future.

When Roosevelt received news of his victory on election night, 1904, he was reported to have said: "Tomorrow I shall come into my office in my own right. Then

watch out for me.”<sup>123</sup> Bolstered up by his big victory, Roosevelt veered further leftward in his second term. Now he would be able to fully play out his role as the nation’s number one frontier cowboy casting himself as lead egalitarian democrat who would challenge the phony and corrupting influences of the eastern robber barons. In addition to conservation his legislative achievements included regulation of the railroad industry, the Pure Food and Drug Act (first in a series of acts aimed at consumer protection), and a proposed inheritance tax for the wealthy. Through it all Roosevelt maintained his constant preaching against the perils of “materialism” and the lavish “malefactors of great wealth.”<sup>124</sup> For TR, wealthy easterners as a group were much more degenerative and effeminate than those self-reliant but kind-hearted, good neighbor westerners whom he was proud to live and work with. Related to this view, Roosevelt prescribed a formula for the American people based on a sense of moral purpose. “If ever our people become so sordid as to feel that all that counts is moneyed prosperity, ignoble well-being, effortless ease and comfort,” TR cautioned, “then this nation shall perish, as it will deserve to perish, from the earth.”<sup>125</sup> Roosevelt came with time to reject that attitude of Social Darwinists and instead felt that men at the roundup, in battle, or working the fields deserved shorter hours of labor, better housing, and greater opportunities to reach higher levels of existence. What he desired instead was to create a great a balance between individualism and collectivism—something which he regarded as a fair, timeless solution.

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<sup>123</sup> Election night Roosevelt quoted in James MacGregor Burns and Susan Dunn, *The Three Roosevelts: Patrician Leaders Who Transformed America*. (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2001): 78.

<sup>124</sup> TR’s descriptions of wealthy types in Naylor et al, *Theodore Roosevelt: Many Sided American*, 501.

<sup>125</sup> TR quotation in Burns and Dunn, *The Three Roosevelts*, 95.

As President, Theodore Roosevelt sought in particular to cut down to size the accepted equation of wealth with virtue and the popular blending of the image of the successful businessman with the good and upright citizen. Riches and virtue were as much opposites, TR believed, as money and spirituality. He saw the main problem of his age as the unchecked power of corporate capitalism and wanted to use the federal government to help maintain at least some level of equality of opportunity and fairness in American life.<sup>126</sup> Roosevelt openly attacked “wealthy men of enormous power, some of whom have shown themselves cynically and brutally indifferent to the interests of the people.”<sup>127</sup> These “representatives of predatory wealth—of wealth accumulated on a giant scale by all forms of iniquity” from exploiting wage workers to destroying competition to scamming the public—need to be overthrown by making their corrupt and “hideous” practices known to the public.<sup>128</sup> As the leader of this “ethical movement,” TR promised to “cut out rottenness from the body politic” and announced that his mission was to stop “those rich men whose lives are corrupt and evil” from controlling the “destinies of this country.”<sup>129</sup> While Congressional income tax and inheritance taxes would not be brought in until the decade after TR’s presidency, his hammering at these points began to change Americans’ perceptions of their society and provoked a nationwide debate on the issue of inherited wealth and power in an egalitarian democracy. Roosevelt, then, played a major role in creating the climate that made these changes possible. And he was, in fact, the first president to grapple with a question that Americans still struggle with today: what should be the relationship between the federal government and concentrations of business power? TR realized that it could be many

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<sup>126</sup> See *Ibid*, 95-96.

<sup>127</sup> TR quoted in *Ibid*, 96.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid*, 104.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid*, 96.

years before his radical “campaign against privilege” might have the desired effect: “it must be a slow process of education through generations,” he admitted to a friend, but these changes he believed would come with time.<sup>130</sup> The eternal optimist TR believed that the progressive-frontier dynamic, which he saw himself as having been an integral part of, would carry forward for generations to come.



**Figure 2.5: President Roosevelt on horseback leaping a split rail fence (1902).** Though TR saw many hurdles to be overcome he believed that the progressive-Frontier dynamic would ultimately carry the day: providing Americans with equality of opportunity based on a balance of power in society. Roosevelt and his supporters viewed this as a timeless solution. (Courtesy: Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC, #LC-USZ62-11960)

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<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

## **TR's New Nationalism**

For Roosevelt, being a cowboy out West and governing in the East were the two most exciting businesses on earth. He clearly did not like sitting on the sidelines during his post-presidential years. In keeping with his personal need to maintain a certain level of “strenuousness,” Roosevelt did more than any other President in the years after he left the White House to have a substantive impact on the direction of US politics and government.

For his times, the progressive Theodore Roosevelt grew increasingly liberal, even radical, on issues such as government regulation and intervention, conservation, the distribution of power and wealth, and race relations during his presidency and in the years after he left office. These positions became tied in the popular mind to Roosevelt and his cowboy ways. And this was not all simply image and perception. As President, TR had already surprised many with his reasonableness at home and, for the most part, restraint abroad. Roosevelt had even become the first American President (not without some irony) to win the Nobel Peace Prize for his role in negotiations at Sagamore Hill to end the Russo-Japanese War. The first in a line of “progressive presidents” (which continued especially with Woodrow Wilson, FDR, JFK, and ended with fellow-cowman LBJ in the 1960s), TR used his cowboy credentials in office, and in the decade which followed, to promote greater federal government involvement in social, economic and foreign policy—helping set the stage for increasingly “liberal” presidential agendas which would follow.

In August 1910, Roosevelt made arguably the most important speech of his career on the subject of the “New Nationalism” at Osawatimie, Kansas. Here he adamantly put national ahead of sectional or regional interests and unbuckled his holster on

Republican President William Howard Taft when he announced that “Labor is the superior of capital and deserves much the higher consideration.”<sup>131</sup> Throwing his lot in with those supporting the eight-hour day, workmen’s compensation laws and labour’s right to organize, TR told the cheering crowd that “The man who wrongly holds that every human right is secondary to his profit must now give way to the advocate of human welfare, who rightly maintains that every man holds his property subject to the general right of the community to regulate its use to whatever degree the public welfare may require it.”<sup>132</sup> Placing himself at the head of the liberal movement he insisted that conservation, currency reform, the direct primary and regulation of child labour were all needed in order to bring about the greater good of “national efficiency” or the “New Nationalism.”<sup>133</sup> The collectivist responsibilities of the broad community, he continued to insist, could assure the increased opportunity for all to realize this full potential. It was a philosophy that was placed in the realm of federal law the same kind of principles that TR had been advocating in his publications from his ranching through his post-presidential days in *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*, *Wilderness Hunter*, and *African Game Trails* just to name a few. All of these books were intended to instruct readers on the kinds of qualities that would make them better citizens who could both support themselves and the common good: they also emphasized that success in the hunt often depended on teamwork. For Roosevelt, “manly qualities” did not only include toughness and individualism, but also cooperation, hospitality and camaraderie. As TR had asserted in *The Winning of the West*: “colonization was not done by individuals, but by

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<sup>131</sup> TR quoted in William E. Leuchtenburg, ed., *Theodore Roosevelt: The New Nationalism* (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1961): 24.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid*, 32-33. For descriptions of the crowd and its response see footnotes in *Ibid* 21-22.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid*, 35.

groups of individuals.”<sup>134</sup> Long before his talk of a Square Deal and New Nationalism, TR told his fellow Americans that his Western experience and profound adherence to the Frontier Myth had taught him that mutual support can be crucial to individual well-being.

When Roosevelt’s friend Wister prepared a new illustrated edition of *The Virginian* in 1911 his revised introduction was obviously intended as a political endorsement of TR, who Wister knew was considering a 1912 presidential run. “Ten years ago, when political darkness still lay dense upon every State in the Union,” Wister began, “this book was dedicated to the greatest benefactor we people have known since Lincoln. Today he is a benefactor even greater than he was then; his voice, instead of being almost solitary, has inspired many followers.” If Wister’s novel was “anything more than an American story,” the novelist concluded, it was “an expression of American faith” or, in other words, faith in Roosevelt.<sup>135</sup>

After TR was unsuccessful in his bid to capture the Republican Party nomination in 1912 (though TR had the more popular appeal, Taft had the GOP Party machine behind his re-election bid) he declared himself “as fit as a Bull Moose” and led the formation of a third party, the Progressive Party, which attempted to recapture the presidency under that new banner. Before long the Bull Moose became his party’s new emblem in the bid for the presidency as TR “called for the creation of a full welfare state by advocating social security insurance to cope with the ‘hazards of sickness, accident, invalidism, involuntary unemployment, and old age....’”<sup>136</sup> Roosevelt thus became the first president or former president to begin the process toward the Medicare Act which would be

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<sup>134</sup> TR’s *Winning of the West* quoted in Rego, *American Ideal*, 89.

<sup>135</sup> All quotations of Wister appear in Scharnhorst, *Owen Wister and the West*, 192.

<sup>136</sup> TR quoted in Max J. Skidmore, “Presidents and the Development of Medicare in the United States,” *White House Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2005): 28.



signed into law by LBJ in 1965. TR's new party also pushed for more direct democracy through promoting women's right to vote, direct primaries, referendums and the direct election of US Senators. Reiterating the same essential philosophy and trajectory that he had established during his presidency, Roosevelt continued to insist that American society, as in frontier society, had a responsibility to ensure that everyone got a fair chance to show his worth and that it was up to government to ensure that this happened by levelling the playing field of conditions under which Americans were forced to live. Too much individualism without any feeling or sense of obligation to the rest of the community was viewed as promoting selfishness and allowing for the exploitation of the weaker members of society. The frontier theme that had benefitted Roosevelt so well in previous campaigns continued to take centre stage in 1912 to the point that TR even displayed 69 year-old Frank James as his Bull Moose bodyguard.<sup>137</sup>

Since Theodore Roosevelt's death in 1919, many Americans have lost sight of his leftist, radical side and his image has sometimes been applied to phony claimants hoping to benefit from Roosevelt's star power. Ultra-conservative Warren G. Harding had labeled TR a communist in 1912 but, as President, exploited his fellow Republican's memory to win the White House in 1920 (and Harding, as we shall see, would not be the last presidential hopeful to do this). William Allen White, the Kansas newspaper editor and Progressive movement leader, once declared that had TR been brought back to life in the 1920s and spoken his mind: "the various societies, security leagues, minute men of the republic, and 100 percent Americans would start a whispering campaign that his real name was Feodor Roosevisky and that he was sent here as an agent of the Bolshiveki." Douglas Brinkley, author of *The Wilderness Warrior*, contends that a TR

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<sup>137</sup> Murdoch, *The American West*, 71.

today might not be too far off of that perception when he writes that “The truth of the matter is that Roosevelt today would be on the left.”<sup>138</sup>

The Frontier Myth is not property of one major political party or the other: both parties have laid claim to the myth during different periods in time. The myth emerged from the social realities and events that preoccupied the country at the turn of the century and was then shaped and deployed through the ideas, words and actions of its major proponents, of which TR was the number one political protagonist. It was a vision that drew on a legendary past to create a future that was impervious to regional characteristics and, initially, promoted predominantly liberal policies of inclusiveness and federal government programs of intervention both at home and abroad. The Republican Convention of 1912 was arguably a historical turning point in terms of Party domination of the Frontier Myth. According to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.: “By rejecting Roosevelt, the Republicans turned their backs on responsible conservatism.”<sup>139</sup> When Roosevelt and the Progressive Republicans bolted the GOP they left the old guard fully in control. TR had for the most part championed an inclusive party and a program of reform and innovation; but these elements now departed the GOP and would eventually take shape, instead, in the Democratic Party of FDR and the next cowboy president Lyndon Baines Johnson. In the arena of presidential politics, TR’s frontier-style progressive reform would carry the Frontier Myth forward—for the most part under the mantle a party different from his own—until the rise of Reagan conservatism in 1980. That same year TR’s eldest daughter, Alice (a supporter of Democrats JFK and LBJ), passed away at the age of 96.

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<sup>138</sup> William Allen White quoted in Kathleen Dalton, *Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life*, 653, FN #20; Douglas Brinkley quoted in Bob Herbert, “A World of Difference,” *New York Times* (August 19, 2008): A19.

<sup>139</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. quoted in Burns and Dunn, *The Three Roosevelts*, 131.

## **Conclusion**

Theodore Roosevelt is unique among US Presidents for the crucial role that he personally played in establishing the foundations of the Frontier Myth as the foremost interpretive framework for American society. His was also the first presidency to deploy the Frontier and Western myths and symbolism to understand, explain, and justify foreign and domestic situations (events) and to shape specific policy agendas that his administration adopted. The myth was accepted during the Roosevelt Era and used as a discursive framework that would become durable and dynamic enough to explain the entire range of America's experiences and policy in the twentieth century. No longer was it restricted to the geographic area of the West. Roosevelt's frontierism is one of the most important historic examples in support of Brian Dippie's contention that myths are more important than facts in shaping some public policy. Ideas that existed in the popular mind, the arts, and various movements, had consequences for the shape of American society and presidential politics. TR's thesis of forward-thinking liberalism, proactive government, selective intervention abroad, and greater inclusion through a "melting pot" established the early contours of the Frontier Myth. This shaping of ideas about the Western frontier experience would carry a great deal of power for decades to come and had major consequences for the attitudes, policies and decisions made by future progressive Presidents: in particular Lyndon Johnson.

Roosevelt came to the White House during an age of tremendous industrial growth and his modern approach to the presidency—with its heavy deployment of the Frontier Myth—raised questions which Americans are still grappling with more than a century later. In the decades between TR and LBJ, there would be a much more limited

deployment of the myth by American presidents. It was during these early to mid-century decades, however, that the myth firmly established itself in American popular culture as the most persuasive structure for interpreting America's past and providing solutions for the present and future. The entrenchment of the Frontier Myth phenomenon in the mind of the American public and at least three of its future presidential leaders will be the focus of Chapter III.

### III.

#### **“Print the Legend”: The Early to Mid-Twentieth Century Frontier Myth In Popular Culture, Media and Politics**

The eye of the [TV] camera let the living room viewer travel freely in time and space, backward to the Alamo, forward to the moon.

--Kara Ann Marling, *As Seen on TV*<sup>140</sup>

#### **Introduction**

From the early through the mid-twentieth century, the set of past experiences that Americans ascribed to their frontier heritage became guideposts for the present and a vision to inspire the future because they chose to view them as something crucial in their experience. “The West of the Imagination,” as the Goetzmanns coined it in their classic study of the Western frontier as people imagined it,<sup>141</sup> informed Americans’ sense of identity, sense of community and place, foreign policy, and their purpose on Earth and into the “final frontier” of space. Frontier western imagery permeated American popular culture which was finding new expressions through literature and twentieth century technologies of film, radio, and TV, and the images transmitted through these media

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<sup>140</sup> Kara Ann Marling, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1994): 124.

<sup>141</sup> William H. Goetzmann and William N. Goetzmann, *The West of the Imagination* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1986).

informed American policy and political life in profound ways that had meaning and consequences for Americans of all regions, races, religions and political inclinations.

This chapter explores the Frontier Myth's pervasiveness and more specifically the ways in which popular culture reflected the changing myth during the early to mid-twentieth century in ways that promoted both liberal and conservative values. Major events such as the Great Depression, World War II, the Cold War and early Civil Rights movement challenged and shaped the changing contours of the Frontier Myth. First and foremost the various forms of popular culture during this period reflect and reveal Americans' ongoing searches for answers and guidance in an increasingly complex and rapidly changing world.

### **The Historian and the Artist**

Despite being dismissed by most academics as incomplete and inaccurate in its details, Frederick Jackson Turner's nationalistic world view had rolled through the American popular and political consciousness like a tsunami. In the most famous passage from his "Significance" essay, describing the new breed of person who had been created from conquest of the wilderness, Turner had told Americans that it was "To the frontier that the American intellect owes its striking characteristics...." The westering experience, then, was not over because its spirit had forged its way into the American character for all time. In Paul A. Carter's *Revolt Against Destiny* (1989), the author contends correctly that the Turner essay "is, without a doubt the single most influential essay ever written by an American historian; influential not merely upon other historians but also upon the public at large—many members of which have grasped, and been moved by, the general idea contained in the essay even if they have never heard the

name Frederick Jackson Turner.”<sup>142</sup> As we have already seen, politicians, including Presidents, are highly susceptible to its effects as well. For as historian John Hellman writes, regardless of what the West was really like: “[mythic] stories are always true in the sense that they express deeply held beliefs.”<sup>143</sup>



**Figure 3.1: John Gast, *American Progress*, 1872.** (Chromolithograph published by George A. Crofutt. Courtesy: Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC)

The vision of the frontier Turner had expressed so eloquently in words had already made up part of American popular thought before he, Roosevelt, Remington and Wister

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<sup>142</sup> Paul A. Carter, *Revolt Against Destiny: An Intellectual History of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989): 17.

<sup>143</sup> John Hellman quoted in Murdoch, *The American West*, 120.

had arrived on the scene. Many of the Frontier Myth's fundamental features are highlighted in the 1872 painting of John Gast, titled variously as *American Progress* or *Westward Ho* (Figure 3.1). Here we see, in mythologized form, a painting that conveys the movement westward along with a strong sense of time passing. Groups of figures viewing from left to right, include Indians, bears and buffalo retreating in the face of Euro-American prospectors who are followed in succession by farmers and settlers. Obvious symbols of progress are presented in the image: from telegraph lines to railroads, with the former being extended by the left hand of the floating Columbia, a personification of the United States, who carries in her right hand a book of laws. As she leads the march of "civilized" progress coming from the East to the West, the imagery reveals that the frontier would be developed by the same sequential waves of peoples later described by Turner. Tough, self-reliant pioneers follow the "sacred plow" westward while Indians, unable to adjust to the forward movement of history, flee toward the Pacific in a shrinking, continental frontier. The ideas presented in Gast's painting not only contain the main elements that Turner would draw upon for his thesis, they suggest that by the time his essay reached the American public these ideas were already recognizable to them.<sup>144</sup>

### **Scholars of the "Myth and Symbols" School and the Frontier Myth**

For more than half a century scholars have explored literature, films, television and other forms of popular culture in an effort to understand the American character and the role that the frontier myth has played in shaping it. In 1950, Henry Nash

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<sup>144</sup> Martha A. Sandweiss, "John Gast, *American Progress*, 1872," American Social History Project, Center for Media and Learning, The Graduate Center, CUNY, <[http://picturinghistory.gc.cuny.edu/item.php?item\\_id=180](http://picturinghistory.gc.cuny.edu/item.php?item_id=180)> (accessed 18 June 2015).



Smith's classic, cross-disciplinary study of Western myth, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (uniting the fields of literary criticism, history, cultural anthropology, and psychology), the author described for the first time the mythic qualities of Turner's thesis—including prophecies of the American empire that the victorious experience of World War II seemed to have fulfilled. Smith viewed the contribution of the Western region as its capacity to inspire. He demonstrates how Turner had brought back time-worn themes some of which had appeared since the early 1600s, and that these added a heroic character to his frontier thesis. Smith conceded that while western history continued to be used for political purposes the language of the frontier had a history that long preceded TR's generation. Drawing on different elements of Turner's thesis, his underlying premise is compelling: "History cannot happen, that is, men cannot engage in purposive group behavior—without images which simultaneously express collective desires and impose coherence on the infinitely numerous and infinitely varied data of the experience."<sup>145</sup> For Smith—as Brian Dippie demonstrated repeatedly in *The Vanishing American*—myths make history: perceptions of "facts" and the emotional appeal of ideas are often what mattered most in shaping action. In this sense, myth trumps "reality."

Richard Slotkin followed a similar methodological "myth and symbol" school approach to Smith when he released the first in his trilogy of works on the frontier in American culture in 1973.<sup>146</sup> But Slotkin, a product of the 1960s, intended his work to be

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<sup>145</sup> Smith, *Virgin Land*, ix.

<sup>146</sup> The first of these is the main topic of discussion here: Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973). His follow up volumes are: Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (New York: Atheneum, 1985); and Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992).

a corrective to Smith's upbeat analysis. His "regeneration through violence" theme is essentially that the civilized must engage in acts of barbarity to defeat savage enemies and that, in the process, they are spiritually regenerated. The Roosevelt frontier myth, as Slotkin interprets it, became engrained in America's collective experience as a symbol of the notion of progress and of new potentials for moral, spiritual and physical renewal. By the twentieth century, when America had run out of frontier at home, Slotkin contends that it had to pursue this overseas. Slotkin, like Smith, provides us with numerous examples of this frontier philosophy appearing in literature—and in popular films too. As with Smith, he argues forcefully that the image of the nineteenth century West had a profound impact on American culture. Much of the symbolism presented in *Virgin Land*, however, was positive: the pull of the West on the Eastern imagination; a Garden of Eden, larger than life heroes, the West as a land of opportunity, and the stories of Empire building. Smith's self-congratulatory approach was well received by Americans at mid-century. In keeping with the changing attitudes of the times, Slotkin's much darker, revisionist interpretation received an enthusiastic reception in the early 1970s. In short then, the two authors agree that ideas about the frontier caused people to act, that myths make history; but while Smith looks at the more patriotic vision, Slotkin focuses on the negative impact of the Western movement: at imperialism, racism and violence.

In the most recent major analysis of the origins of the Frontier Myth and popular culture/media, *The American West: The Invention of a Myth* (2001), historian David Murdoch asserts that a myth "plot" was hatched by the likes of Buffalo Bill Cody, TR, Frederick Remington and Owen Wister as a purposeful effort to create a "functional

myth” of the West. The constructed myth in this conspiratorial view, would then act as a means of guiding the American people through a decade of crisis. Murdoch sees the “deliberate” creation of the “entirely” manufactured Frontier Myth and its central cowboy hero<sup>147</sup> as a response to a deep sense of loss associated with a better past in the face of disturbing change in the present, including: corporate corruption, massive immigration, urban despair, and the loss of manly virtues among native-born American males. Along with academics of their day such as Turner, this group of myth-makers allegedly felt a post-frontier society desperately needed this myth for the nation to continue thriving into the future. In later decades, Murdoch contends that Westerners of all descriptions bought into the self-flattering frontier imagery for a variety of reasons. It is a myth that, Murdoch believes, intentionally distorts, conceals and misleads. Along the way, twentieth-century politicians were supplied with a host of powerful images to manipulate.

While I accept some elements of David Murdoch’s post-modern argument, in specific circumstances, my concern with his approach is that he tends to trivialize myth, defines his audience as hopelessly gullible, and characterizes the Frontier Myth’s protagonists as, more often than not, cynical. Overall, in my view, Smith, Slotkin and the Goetzmanns have argued more convincingly that myth cannot be created so much as it can be discovered. As they contend, the idea of the frontier resonates so much with Americans because it grew out of a fundamental creation myth and this myth, in turn, is *revealed* rather than *created* by popular culture. As the Goetzmanns contend, “in describing the myth, we are also describing a perceived reality that has profoundly

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<sup>147</sup> Murdoch, *The American West*, 64, 44.

affected both Western and American behaviour patterns and values.”<sup>148</sup> Thus, understanding the Frontier Myth as it appears in American culture (including novels, films and political speeches) is key to understanding America’s preoccupations at a given period in time. John Cawelti contends that the Western story is likewise “a time and culture bound production”<sup>149</sup> and that “the myth shifted significantly at the beginning of the twentieth century to revitalize the significance of certain values associated with the wilderness, i.e. manliness, vigor.” But this, I would contend, was (usually) more a reflection of the cultural milieu of the times—which influenced both the elites and common folk—rather than a result of deliberate and manipulative salesmanship. This said, I concede that there are some specific cases—as we shall see—when the myth does appear to have been employed more cynically by the Frontier Presidents to help promote themselves or their policies.

The crucial half century of the Frontier Myth, between liberal frontier presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson, would set the stage for the full blown acceptance and deployment of the myth in the “frontier presidencies” of LBJ, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush. It also laid some of the groundwork for the wholesale political shift in the myth’s emphasis from liberalism to conservatism that would follow in the wake of the tumultuous events of the late 1960s and 1970s.

### **Zane Grey’s West**

The unprecedented success of novelist Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* (1902) brought forth a plethora of westerns, including cowboy hero books that carried

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<sup>148</sup> Goetzmann and Goetzmann, *The West of the Imagination*, 434.

<sup>149</sup> Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel*, 6.

Americans further and further away from the nineteenth century West that *was* and into the West that *ought to have been*. From 1912 to 1939, no frontier novelist came even close to being as popular as Ohio-born Zane Grey. His first successful Western, *Riders of the Purple Sage*, sold more than two million copies in 1912.<sup>150</sup> In the decades to follow, Grey produced a near constant flow of Westerns, the majority of which became best-sellers. Murdoch notes that:

Like Wister, Grey was another outsider who (after his first visit to Utah in 1907) became infatuated with the West....Grey's version of the myth was the one which sold—and his plots ran to a rigid formula, his cardboard characters had relationships unknown in the adult world and his heroes were models of rugged rectitude.<sup>151</sup>

Many of the conventions set by novelist Owen Wister and reinforced by Zane Grey would come close to defining the frontier hero in novels, radio and cinema for the next half-century. These mythic outriders of freedom were strong, silent types—frequently lone heroes who fought, often as not, on behalf of the community against those enemies who impeded “progress” and democracy. They were kind to women, children and animals (if not necessarily in that order), instinctively knew the right course of action, in tune with God and nature, and delivered absolute justice, absolutely. Wister and Grey's heroic gunmen also adhere to a special code of the West and resort to violence only when provoked or when some crazed villain(s) threatened a weaker person or community that cannot mount an adequate defense.

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<sup>150</sup> Vernon, “Making Use of the Frontier and the American West,” 11.

<sup>151</sup> Murdoch, *The American West*, 82.

Perhaps Grey's most memorable lone gunman characterization appears in *Riders of the Purple Sage* with his stirring account of the arrival of the avenger in black leather, Jim Lassiter:

Jane Withersteen wheeled and saw a horseman, silhouetted against the western sky, coming riding out of the sage. He had ridden down from the left, in the golden glare of the sun....An answer to her prayer!"

"Do you know him? Does anyone know him?" questioned Tull, hurriedly....

"He's come from far," said one....

"Look!" hoarsely whispered one of Tull's companions. "He packs two black-butted guns—low down—they're hard to see—black agin them black chaps."

"A gun-man!" whispered another. "Fellers, careful now about movin' your hands."<sup>152</sup>

Stirring descriptions of such heroic strangers, sensational gunplay, and "orgies of violence" that made use of the southwestern terrain were all Zane Grey trademarks.<sup>153</sup>

Mormons were another staple of Grey-Westerns. While the author admired members for what he viewed as their strong work ethic, he apparently despised the church's treatment of women: in particular its support for the practice of polygamy. *Riders* tells the tale of a Gentile American man, Lassiter (described above) and his redemption of a gentle and virtuous Mormon woman named Jane. Her rescue from the evils of a polygamist society— a practice likened by Grey to slavery—is connected both to the preservation of monogamy in the American home and to the symbolic of the assimilation of the Mormon Empire into the American Empire. As literature scholar William R. Handley observes: "The rescue of Jane points to the virtue of...Mormon

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<sup>152</sup> Zane Grey, *Riders of the Purple Sage* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1912): 7-8.

<sup>153</sup> Kevin S. Blake, "Zane Grey and Images of the American West," *Geographical Review*, Vol. 85, No. 2 (April 1995): 214.

assimilation and American acceptance.”<sup>154</sup> The *national* Frontier Myth touted in 1912 by Bull-Mooser Roosevelt and accepted by most other Americans viewed monogamous marriage as the cornerstone of Christian civilization; concurrently, in fiction, Mormons were required to shed their *almost* “Other” status by rejecting polygamy, treating women as individuals, and embracing the security of a monogamous relationship. Love between one man and one woman was depicted by Grey as the noblest activity of all people. Jane Withersteen is a reasonable Mormon, a genuine American as opposed to an extremist. Further, she personifies the courageous and determined frontier woman (a figure ignored by Turner two decades earlier) whose role in taming the West is presented as “indispensable.”<sup>155</sup> These themes of domesticity and virtuous frontier womanhood appear in Grey’s fiction featuring non-Mormons as well. In “Call of the Canyon,” an initially resistant Eastern, flapper girl rejects a shell-shocked and gassed World War I veteran who settles in Arizona. By the end of the tale, however, she has straightened herself out and restored her American-style femininity by surrendering her heart to this man of stellar character, embracing the wide-open landscape, and determining to devote her life to raising a family on a ranch out west.<sup>156</sup>

Of Grey’s Western works, his biographer Carlton Jackson writes (in a description that might have been applied to TR’s liberal frontier as well): “The cowboy is the most innocent figure....The guilty parties generally are established businessman who are crooked underneath all of their respectable appearances.”<sup>157</sup> The “McCoy-Slaughter Combine” provides a typical example of this latter characterization in Grey’s

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<sup>154</sup> William R. Handley, “Distinctions without Differences: Zane Grey and the Mormon Question,” *Arizona Quarterly*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (Spring 2001): 10.

<sup>155</sup> Carlton Jackson, *Zane Grey* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1973): 55.

<sup>156</sup> “Call of the Canyon” described in Blake, “Zane Grey and Images of the American West,” 214.

<sup>157</sup> Jackson, *Zane Grey*, 102.

Depression-era *Knights of the Range* (1939). Sewall McCoy and Russ Slaughter were respected ranchers on the surface but in fact were behind a flurry of cruel, avarice-driven violence and cattle rustling. By contrast the *Knights* or “cowboys” of the story were so exemplary that their spiritual leader, Brazos Keene of Texas, even swore off of racial discrimination. Drawing attention to the heroes’ only black cowboy Brazos declares: “I’m sinkin’ race prejudice an’ all theta other damn selfish rot. We’ve got a common cause men.”<sup>158</sup> The good versus evil dichotomy, then, was clearly established both in terms of class and racial inclusiveness.

Grey also made what his biographer Carlton Jackson contends were “highly significant” contributions to the American conservation movement. Jackson observes:

In dozens of articles he lamented wasteful practices—whether perpetuated by sportsmen or by business corporations. In numerous novels he railed against factions that were apparently bent upon scourging the land of its timber and other resources for economic gain....<sup>159</sup>

Zane Grey’s literary contributions through the Interwar period to highlighting a distinction between business crooks and honest men, the significance of gender and ethnic diversity in the West, and the cause of conservation cannot be understated. Though Grey passed away suddenly in September 1939, each of these themes had significant implications for the character of the Frontier Myth continuing through the Second World War and postwar eras. Before his death, Grey had published some 60 books titles and half that number were in manuscript; by 1958, approximately twenty-eight million copies of his books had been sold in the United States alone and four

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<sup>158</sup> Zane Grey’s *Knights of the Range* quoted in Jackson, *Zane Grey*, 102.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid*, 146.



million abroad.<sup>160</sup> If serious critics ignored many of his works, the public certainly did not and his stories of stellar cowboy characters taking on greedy crooks, fanatics who threatened the sanctity of marriage, racists, and those who would sully America's pristine wilderness and wildlife for profit, found their way into countless Hollywood films, radio and later TV programs.

### **The Great Depression Era: From “Kiddie” Westerns to *Stagecoach***

In the realm of presidential politics, after Theodore Roosevelt's failed Bull Moose campaign two decades passed before his fifth cousin, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, came to office and implemented the New Deal. Only at this point was it possible to secure the liberal programs that Theodore had called for.

In the meantime, post-TR Republicans occupied the White House from 1920 to 1932 in an era when there was no Roosevelt and no progressive Republican. Warren G. Harding's scandal ridden administration had called for a “Return to Normalcy” while President Calvin Coolidge (Cowboy President Ronald Reagan's favourite) was passive and inactive but popular. The hyperactive, progressive Theodore and indolent, conservative Cal struck a remarkable contrast.

Later in the interwar period, the faith that Herbert Hoover and the Republicans placed in business prosperity was badly shaken when, a few months after his inauguration in 1929, the bubble burst with a colossal stock market crash. The catastrophic Great Depression which followed contributed to the election of Democrat FDR in 1932 and to the implementation of his experimental New Deal policies. Before long this translated into across the board federal government intervention throughout

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<sup>160</sup> Carstensen, “Making Use of the Frontier,” 11.

the American economy and society. Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal set the tone for the next 35 years. From this point forward the substantive role of the Federal government, which both Roosevelts had advocated for, looked as if it were in place to stay. In the early post-World War II era even conservative Republicans' loudest protest was no longer over whether the Federal government had a right to intervene, but to what degree.

J. Fred MacDonald describes radio as both a reflector and solidifier of popular attitudes and myths in the years between the two world wars. Since the turn of the century, self-sacrifice and assistance for the downtrodden had already been a part of the Western formula but during the Great Depression, MacDonald believes it was sometimes deployed on radio as a key weapon of liberalism and cooperation against the oppressive social and political problems of the Great Depression. On the June 5, 1933 broadcast of NBC radio's variety program *Hollywood on the Air*, kiddie-Western cowboy Buck Jones directed his "Rangers" (young Americans who tuned in faithfully to his broadcasts and believed in "Americanism, good fellowship, and helpfulness"<sup>161</sup>) to help him save the nation from the horrible plight of the Depression:

Far be it for me to make a patriotic speech. But we've got a man in the White House that's doing a mighty sweet job of organizing America, and headin' her back towards prosperity. With summer vacation time coming around, I want to call your attention to a few little things you can do to help Mr. Roosevelt put this big job over in a big way. Times have been pretty tough, times have come when every youngster—boys and girls, too—must pitch in and do something that will help ma and pa make the home a little happier, and the going a little easier. This Depression is like a kink in the rope, and you youngsters can straighten it out by doing a

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<sup>161</sup> Quote from Buck Jones describing his Rangers' values in J. Fred MacDonald, *Don't Touch That Dial! Radio Programming in American Life, 1920-1960* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1979), Online: < <http://jfredmacdonald.com/prologue.htm> > (accessed 15 August 2014).

little fancy roping yourselves, that is if you set your mind to it. You're growing up, you children, and you've got to look years ahead.<sup>162</sup>

MacDonald points out that this cooperative form of morality, as epitomized by the Bible's Ten Commandments, was communicated whether unconsciously or intentionally to its citizens and that children above all else were exposed to and most influenced by its messages.

At the movies, Western director extraordinaire John Ford was making commercial hits that seemed to resonate perfectly with many adult Americans' images of themselves, and with their aspirations. For Ford, film was the perfect media for exploring and creating dramas that portrayed how the American West was settled and civilized. The kinds of tensions that Ford and other directors dealt with in Westerns were brought to Americans' attention by scholars at mid-century. Henry Nash Smith had first described a popular theme of Western film, the competing images of garden and wilderness. In 1964, Leo Marx followed up with his study, *The Machine in the Garden*, which explored Americans' tendency to affirm a state of balance, or what Marx termed "the middle landscape," to preserve the best features of pastoral and mechanized conditions, of the settled and the nomadic.<sup>163</sup> Smith and Marx also considered the experience of being uprooted and searching for one's origins, of leaving home, going into exile, and of returning. All of these frontier themes that helped make up the basis of Americans' sense of identity were tapped into by Ford, whose directing career spanned half of the twentieth century (1917-1966) and included numerous classic Westerns.

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<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939)<sup>164</sup> has been hailed by French film theorist Andre Bazin as the ultimate classical Western: "as symmetrical and balanced as a wheel"<sup>165</sup>; a Depression era film, it was also *thoroughly* populist in tone and in tune politically with a nation undergoing a severe economic crisis. *Stagecoach*, the foundational Western, had it all: the frontier archetypes, an epic journey across an enormous and stunning landscape, and the final conflict between savagery and civilization, good and evil. The East is depicted here as both the origin of enlightenment and of corruption while the West represents heroism and savagery. The wandering hero, Ringo (John Wayne), makes such a splashy entrance early in the film that the camera comes close to running him over as it goes out of focus, then captures the gunman up close twirling his rifle in an impressive, theatrical gesture.

Most importantly, the politics of Ford's most classic of Westerns captures the mood of Depression era America perfectly. The villain(s) of *Stagecoach* is not so much the hostile Indians—who are portrayed primarily as a force of nature and part of the yet-to-be-civilized landscape—but rather, the wealthy banker Henry Gatewood (Berton Churchill). This evil hypocrite preaches to a group of men on the benefits of saving while at the same time preparing to embezzle the \$50,000 they bring to his bank for deposit. Even Mrs. Gatewood takes part in the hypocrisy routine as head of a ladies' league which forces the impoverished and goodhearted prostitute Dallas (Claire Trevor) to leave town. On the stagecoach, while carrying the embezzled funds in a bag on his lap, Gatewood harangues a fellow passenger with off-putting conservative political slogans such as: "America for Americans! The government must not interfere with business"

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<sup>164</sup> *Stagecoach* (1939), United Artists, Dir: John Ford.

<sup>165</sup> Andre Bazin quoted in Jim Kitses, *Horizon's West: Directing the Western from John Ford to Clint Eastwood* (London: British Film Institute, 2004): 44.

and “Reduce taxes! Our national debt is shocking!” For Ford and American movie audiences of the period, those corrupt business types which Gatewood personifies were viewed as *the problem* that had brought on the nation’s contemporary economic catastrophe in the first place. Conversely, goodness in the film is personified in the marginalized common people, in particular Ringo and Dallas. Perceptive townsfolk, including alcoholic Doc, have the smarts and decency to perceive of the couple’s good nature and give them a chance for a new life. The story’s implication of class warfare reaches its climax when Ringo and Dallas emerge redeemed while the disgraced Gatewood is hauled off to jail as audiences cheer. The harrowing frontier experience has, in the end, positively transformed everyone as class prejudices fade away; everyone but the reactionary Gatewood that is, who remains as selfish, bombastic, and two-faced as when the story began.

### **The Red Menace and Cold War Retool the Frontier Myth**

During World War II and the Cold War, the Frontier Myth in popular culture provided a compelling phenomenon for Americans as they attempted to interpret the world. By dividing people and nations up into civilization and savagery, right and wrong, black and white, the frontier struck a highly responsive chord at times when Americans mobilized to face “evil” foreign enemies such as Nazi Germany, militarist Japan, and Soviet Russia.

Following the Second World War, in particular, the superpower standoff helped shape much of the United States self-identity as it engaged in a colossal, lengthy Manichaeian contest with the USSR—a struggle that many compared with that experienced by pioneers of an earlier time as they travelled West on their own or in their

wagon trains to “tame” and settle the continent. Between 1947 and 1950, Westerns accounted for nearly one third of Hollywood’s total production of feature-length films. During these years the cowboy, with his unique combination of community leadership and individualism, came to represent what film historian John Lenihan has described as “a democratic Oedipus and Hamlet who acted on behalf of, but apart from, the larger society to correct some injustice or moral imbalance in the universal scheme.”<sup>166</sup>



**Figure 3.2:** Thomas Hart Benton’s mural, *Independence and the Opening of the West*, 1961, at the entrance lobby to the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum in Independence, Missouri (Unknown photographer).

Several years after Democratic President Harry S. Truman left office at the height of the Cold War in 1953, at the entrance to the Oval Office replica in his presidential

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<sup>166</sup> John H. Lenihan, *Showdown: Confronting Modern America in Western Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980): 16.

museum, a huge mural was created by the regionalist painter Thomas Hart Benton in a kind of collaboration between Benton and the former president himself (Truman helped design the mural and painted a section of the sky). Identified by its title: “Independence and the Opening of the West,” the painting depicts the concept of Manifest Destiny in what is an obvious parallel drawn between the success of the pioneers and settlers of the Old West and the success of stalwart leaders like Truman during the Cold War.<sup>167</sup> The scene portrays in a huge, sweeping, and high energy arc that reflects the popular perception of the westward movement of American civilization as it continues beyond Independence, Missouri (foreshadowing America’s future) and engages the shifting frontier. The idea of Manifest Destiny—a concept still popular among conservatives and liberals at mid-century—is portrayed throughout the artwork. A pioneering family with its wagon train appears at the top centre, representing the pinnacle of heroism and progress, alongside them is a pair of rugged frontiersman and below (to the West) we eye a Euro-American bringing goods for trade with Native American villages. A family of settlers is shown with a “good” Indian chief who accepts the arrival (even implied dominance) of the settlers and offers a peace pipe. But, in the meantime, a “bad” Pawnee warrior stalks the family with a bow and arrow. Conflict seems inevitable. The peaceful Indians will be accommodated but those who refuse face a bleak future.

Ignoring the historical realities behind the dispossession of Native Americans, Benton himself described the scene using a curious blending of conservative racial stereotypes and liberal attitudes about the importance of collective action. The artist wrote: “The Indians were individualistic and acted more frequently on purely personal

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<sup>167</sup> See Benjamin Hufbauer, “‘Spotlights and Shadows’: Presidents and Their Administrations in Presidential Museum Exhibits,” *Public Historian*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Summer 2006): 122.

initiative than the whites who traversed the prairies. The whites knew the value of disciplined cooperative action. That is one reason why they dispossessed the Indians.”<sup>168</sup> At the same time, some of the Native Americans in the painting are industrious, accepting that change is coming, two African American blacksmiths work vigorously in the middle ground and to the right of it, and a Mexican vaquero holding on to a mule, capture the efforts of the artist and president to celebrate America’s ethnic diversity. Truman’s civilized hometown of Independence is positioned to the East (on the right) and the world of the frontier about to be dramatically changed to the West (left): a buffalo skull in the foreground of the mural signifies Native Americans’ passing way of life and the progressive changes being brought to the American West and the nation. Notably, the mural also depicts a broader frontier mythology beyond that of the constrained, lone cowboy image that would be more the focus of future conservative Presidents Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. At the mural’s dedication ceremony on April 15, 1961, Chief Justice Earl Warren’s succinctly describes the intended meaning behind the work—in keeping with the forward looking, liberal Frontier Myth at that point in time. “As our people come to visit the Truman Library,” said Warren, “their eyes will fall upon this great mural....The knowledge of our heroic past will open vistas for them into the future.”<sup>169</sup>

Significantly, when visitors to the Truman Library pass the Benton mural, they realize that it acts as a framing device for the first replica of the Oval Office to be built in a presidential museum. The increased power of the federal government and the office of

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<sup>168</sup> Benton quoted in Benjamin Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples: How Memorials and Libraries Shape Public Memory* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 2005): 52.

<sup>169</sup> Earl Warren quoted in Raymond Geselbracht, “Harry S. Truman, Thomas Hart Benton, And the Making of the Mural,” *Prologue*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Spring 2009), online at <http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2009/spring/benton.html> (accessed 8 February, 2016).



the presidency—as pursued by liberal Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and his cousin Franklin, and enhanced by the realities of the nuclear age—all seemed represented there. Benjamin Hufbauer writes that at the Truman Library visitors gain a sense that “the whole ship of state, was in a sense steered from one room—the Oval Office.”<sup>170</sup> Here the power of the presidency and the Frontier Myth are brought together in one place in a kind of continuing narrative of the nation’s most influential idea and its highest office. This symmetry was especially important in the early 1960s when the mural appeared: a time when the Berlin Wall was being erected and the Soviet-American confrontation was especially intense. Further, the image of white women and children being protected by the armed men in the Benton’s mural seems an obvious metaphor for the “free world” being protected by the United States from the Red *Soviet* Menace during the Cold War.

The darker, cultural undercurrent of anti-communism in the United States also had important long term implications for the nature of the Frontier Myth. For many American conservatives, and some liberals, life in Soviet Russia became one that was envisioned as a kind of opposite definition of America itself. One of the conservative tenets of the Frontier Myth, individualism, along with Americans’ accompanying concerns for civil liberties and property rights, were known to be disdained by the Reds in Moscow who emphasized collective rather than personal rights. In a system which placed society ahead of the individual, Americans increasingly viewed the Russian people as having been reduced to manipulable objects that were incapable of independent thought or action. Those on the right were particularly hostile toward the “Commies” in the Kremlin and their alleged “cradle to grave” control over Soviet

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<sup>170</sup> Hufbauer, “Spotlights and Shadows...,” 122.

citizens. As *Reader's Digest* reported with regularity, "there is no room...for mental independence. The only way to survive is to conform."<sup>171</sup> Throughout the popular media, robotic, enslaved Soviets were depicted as stirring up revolutions, craving power, and living "in a godless, gray and regimented world. Worst of all, these miserable Russians intended to make the rest of the planet in their own dismal image."<sup>172</sup> In the *Digest's* September 1949 reprint from *Life* magazine, *Life's* editors likened the dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* sinister character of Big Brother to a "mating" of Hitler and Stalin, adding that "Behind the iron curtain," Orwell's nightmare "will not seem strange or imaginative at all."<sup>173</sup> The terms *mass society*, the *Holocaust*, *atomic warfare*, *propaganda*, and *totalitarianism* became infused with fear and urgency by the mid-twentieth century and while there was a great deal of optimism for a progressive future among most Americans this co-existed with a sense of fear that gripped the United States as well.

In Hollywood, this fear played itself out through a purge of leftists with alleged links to Communism which took place in the motion picture industry. Beginning in 1950 a little known Republican Senator from Wisconsin, Joseph McCarthy, fast became the most known public figure representing a period in which Cold War anxieties stoked widespread fears of Communist subversion. McCarthy gained enormous publicity for himself by insisting that the United States was riddled with large numbers of Soviet spies and Communists—along with their sympathizers—in the federal government, Hollywood's film industry, and elsewhere. The inclusive and collective liberal myth was

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<sup>171</sup> Nina I. Alexiev, "I Didn't Want My Children to Grow Up in Soviet Russia," *Reader's Digest* (June 1947): 15.

<sup>172</sup> David A. Smith, "American Nightmare: Images of Brainwashing, Thought Control, and Terror in Soviet Russia, *Journal of American Culture*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (2010): 220.

<sup>173</sup> *Life* quoted in George Woodcock, *The Crystal Spirit: A Study of George Orwell* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1966): 156.

thus challenged head on by McCarthy and company. Though, in the end, the Senator himself would eventually be exposed as a reckless bully who ignored due process and attacked others more respected than himself, some of the ideas he represented continued to fester for years to come.

According to historian John Lukacs, by the late 1940s, anti-Communism had become for American conservatives a kind of substitute—“and often even more than a substitute”—for what they considered patriotism in the United States.<sup>174</sup> Increasingly, American audiences of popular culture were encouraged both implicitly and explicitly to carry the fight to the Reds in the international arena by turning to the same kind of core values that had allegedly sustained their forebears through the frontier era. Westerns of the 1950s were relevant drama that embodied the psychology of the struggle between the Soviet East and “Free” West. For Americans wary of the Reds, in particular, it was there on that “virgin land” that the simple and rugged truths of pre-industrial America thrived: individualism, “know how,” self-reliance, and higher values. In an age of anxiety and growing international tension, the cowboy hero answered to a higher law and offered straight solutions that conservative and populist Americans in particular appreciated. The Western story’s pervasiveness during the postwar era is in part reflective of American’s fear of their Soviet enemy and of determinism, and of their desire for simple answers in difficult times.

During the Depression era, Westerns such as *Stagecoach* and singing cowboy entertainers including “The Sons of the Pioneers”<sup>175</sup> had bolstered American communities against corrupt bankers and malicious crooks. The Second World War

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<sup>174</sup> John Lukacs, *Democracy and Populism: Fear and Hatred* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005): 149, 151.

<sup>175</sup> Travis D. Stimeling, “The Sons of the Pioneers’ Lucky “U” Ranch and the Singing Cowboy in Cold War America,” *American Music*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Spring 2010): 92.

period saw these stars stand against the extremist foes of Hitler and Tojo. Likewise during the Cold War, Western and frontier heroes continued to promote simple and practical solutions to complicated geopolitical issues abroad and at home. Calling upon conservative nostalgia and promoting a liberal rhetoric of community, these idealized images of an older America were even, to some degree, applied to Harry Truman's successor.

Moderate Republican President Dwight "Ike" Eisenhower, had grown up in the central plains of Abilene, Kansas and the 1950's "Eisenhower Western," as it became coined by film critics, was one that reflected the persona of the President himself. Typically these featured a good guy in white (Ike) facing down an evil black-hat (especially Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev) or their gang which sprang from the hostile landscape (like Soviet proxy wars), taking over towns and generally terrorizing otherwise decent folk who called out for nothing more than some basic freedoms and justice. For the purposes of this study, what is most significant about this connection between Ike and films about the frontier west is that elements of American society, especially conservatives, were beginning to seek out idealized images of an older America and to counterpoise them against the negative images of modern life and bureaucratization, which for them the Soviet Union came to symbolize. Beneath the broadly accepted political liberalism of the early postwar era, a growing undercurrent of suspicion arose as Americans believed that they needed to be vigilant to head off threats to their own traditional ways of life. The Cowboy hero and landscape were, in effect, being retooled for the Cold War. And this reality would have long term implications for the political nature of the Frontier Myth—compromising some of its liberal values even

in advance of Lyndon Johnson, arguably the most liberal of all the “Frontier” Presidents.

### **The Cold War’s Frontiers of the Left and the Right**

From the early 1950s through the late 1960s, in particular, the Western was *the* dominant genre of American film and television entertainment. Amid the intensity of the Cold War, Westerns portrayed the conquering of the frontier to help assure a troubled citizenry worried that their country, and rest of the world, might not survive the current struggle with their Soviet enemies. At their height, Cold War juvenile westerns provided American boys and girls with the ultimate “hero” role model to emulate. In 1951 Gene Autry, an avid supporter of FDR’s New Deal, promoted his “Cowboy Code”—or what amounted to a kind of frontier Ten Commandments—reflecting the power inherent in the genre to express dominant ideals and to persuade. Autry’s code declared, solemnly, that:

1. A cowboy never takes unfair advantage, even of an enemy.
2. A cowboy never betrays a trust.
3. A cowboy always tells the truth.
4. A cowboy is kind to small children, to old folks, and to animals.
5. A cowboy is free from racial and religious prejudice.
6. A cowboy is always helpful, and when anyone’s in trouble, he lends a hand.
7. A cowboy is a good worker.
8. A cowboy is clean about his person, and in thought, word, and deed.
9. A cowboy respects womanhood, his parents, and the laws of his country.
10. A cowboy is a patriot.<sup>176</sup>

Significantly, the popular “The Lone Ranger” TV program focused especially on Commandment 10, with a patriotic bent being written directly into its production company’s statement of standards: “The Lone Ranger is motivated by love of country—a

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<sup>176</sup> J. Fred MacDonald, *Television and the Red Menace* (New York: Praeger, 1985): 135-36.

desire to help those who are building the West....Patriotism means service to a community; voting...the development of schools and churches [and]...the preservation of things for which our ancestors fought and died.”<sup>177</sup> The creator of the program, George W. Trendle, also wanted a hero who was tolerant, had no bad habits, and could “fight great odds, yet take time to treat a bird with a broken wing.”<sup>178</sup> The Masked Man, then, was both a patriot and a progressive paladin. No doubt TR and future president LBJ would have enthusiastically approved. But while the Cold War Western’s for little cowpokes remained predominantly liberal, some of the most influential frontier and cowboy productions of the age had clearly conservative elements as well.

J. Fred MacDonald argues that the most concentrated lesson for youth in Cold War Americanism came from the Walt Disney blockbuster film *Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier* (1955) in theatres, and the supplementary five-part serial that aired on ABC-TV. The Disney version of frontiersman Crockett possessed an innocent belief in direct action in the cause of right, represented the honest common folk, and promoted democracy without hesitation. The honest pioneer, Davy made the ultimate frontiersman sacrifice, traveling to Texas to lend a helping hand because “Americans are in trouble” and because it was there on the southwest frontier that “freedom was fightin’ another foe.”<sup>179</sup> Disney’s version of Davy Crockett seemed to fit the times perfectly as one willing to fight and die at the Alamo, so the story went, to spread democracy and justice on the lands beyond the United States’ existing borders. But Crockett was hardly a strict adherent to the Cowboy Code: using his knife, rifle and cannon to kill dozens of Mexicans without government sanction. Davy spoke with conviction about the rights of

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<sup>177</sup> Production company standards quoted in *Ibid*, 136.

<sup>178</sup> George B. Trendle quoted in *Ibid*, 136.

<sup>179</sup> Disney’s Davy Crockett (Fess Parker) quoted in *Ibid*, 137.

Cherokees, but also killed warring Creek Indians. On the whole, then, Disney's Crockett was a kind of blending of hawkish imperialism and progressive enlightenment, mixing his conservative with his liberal qualities. One popular image of the frontiersman was of one who died heroically at the Alamo: both in the name of democracy and justice and in the cause of American (or more accurately Texican) imperialism and expansion. The celluloid Crockett was one that could appeal equally to Americans on different sides of the political spectrum, depending on which qualities one chose to emphasize.

Another highly popular and critically acclaimed Western of the 1950s was director George Stevens *Shane* (1953) based on the Jack Schaefer novel of the same name. Along with its impressive landscape cinematography the film's most notable and innovative feature is its emphasis on the narrative from the viewpoint of a young boy, Joey (Brandon deWilde), who mythologizes the gunslinger. The story, featuring a lone rider helping a group of homesteaders stand up against a cruel and greedy cattle baron, has been a standard plot convention used in numerous Louis L'Amour novels, B-Westerns, and historically relates to the Johnson County War of 1892. *Shane's* cattle baron is Rufus Ryker (Emile Meyer), who tries to run the pioneer homesteaders out of town by seizing the land they claimed under the Homestead Acts. Like most Cattle Barons (a metaphor similar to that of "Robber Baron" or "Railroad Baron" in TR's day), Ryker is a frontier heavy who desires to crush any independent ranchers who get in his way as a means of adding to his own ill-gotten power and wealth. In the end Shane (Alan Ladd), frontier society's equalizer, must reluctantly strap on his guns to defeat Ryker's villainous and psychotic hired-gun, Jack Wilson (Jack Palance).

Jenni Calder writes that Cold War Western dramas in all media featured heroic “individuals willing to risk everything to guarantee the well-being of average folks.”<sup>180</sup> In popular culture, the Frontier Hero represented law and order and individualism, along with support for the community and the progressive future in the West. Often they knew that their time as a gunman was passing, that the civilizing process would soon leave them an anachronism, but before then their unique gift for violence was desperately needed by those innocent and honest Americans being victimized by evil and sadistic villains. The Second World War had repeatedly displayed the extremes of human cruelty and, for many Americans, the Cold War saw things get even worse behind the Communist Iron Curtain. If Americans saw little about the recent historical past to put their minds at ease about the future, they could always turn to the frontier hero who answered to a higher law. Whether in its original radio and TV orientation toward children, or in the “adult” western that soon emerged, it was there on that “virgin land” that all of the alleged rugged and simple truths of frontier life could be portrayed most effectively. At its height, as many as sixty million viewers per night watched television westerns and, by January 1959, eight of the top ten programs were of that genre.<sup>181</sup> The western story's pervasiveness during the postwar era is indicative of Americans' fears of totalitarianism, of global war in a nuclear age, and of the desire for simple answers in

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<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>181</sup> Nielsen US television ratings for January 1959:

1. *Gunsmoke*; 2. *Have Gun Will Travel*; 3. *The Rifleman*; 4. *Wagon Train*; 5. *The Danny Thomas Show* (comedy); 6. *The Real McCoys* (comedy); 7. *Tales of Wells Fargo*; 8. *Maverick*; 9. *The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp*; and 10. *Zane Grey Theater*.

Source: J. Fred MacDonald, *Television and the Red Menace*, 139.



difficult times.<sup>182</sup> The Frontier Myth of this period, though not completely transformed by the event of the Cold War, was accommodating it in important ways.

In movie theatres in particular, some of the most innovative Westerns of the postwar years also complicated the Frontier Myth politically by introducing conservative as well as liberal elements and by challenging the hero's goodness and virtue and even that of American society itself. Two such "superwestern"<sup>183</sup> films of the 1950s that clearly resonated with future "frontier" Presidents are Director Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon* (1952) and John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956).

*High Noon's* Marshall Will Kane (Gary Cooper) cannot find anyone in Hadleyville to help him in a noon showdown with four dangerous outlaw gunmen, the Miller gang. Tension in the film is greatly enhanced by having it take place in "real time." As the clock ticks toward the noon showdown, Kane's beliefs are tested to their absolute limits when the cowardly hypocrites and opportunists in town all find excuses for not getting involved. Carl Foreman began drafting the script early in 1951 and soon found himself forced to appear before the House on Un-American Activities. He saw a great deal of himself in the role created for Gary Cooper. "I was the [Gary] Cooper character," he said, referring to his standing on principles by refusing to aid in naming names of alleged "Reds" in Hollywood and being shunned by others as a result. "There are scenes in that film that are taken from life. The scene in the church is the distillation of meetings I had with partners, associates, and lawyers."<sup>184</sup> Dumped by his long-time partner, Foreman

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<sup>182</sup> Some sentences in this paragraph were paraphrased/partially excerpted from: David A. Smith, "American Nightmare," 226.

<sup>183</sup> A term coined by Andre Bazin for westerns that were innovative in "aesthetic, sociological, moral, psychological, political or erotic" terms. See Peter Lev, *History of the American Cinema: Transforming the Screen, 1950-1959*, Vol. 7 (New York: Scribner, 2003): 54.

<sup>184</sup> Carl Foreman quoted in Michael F. Blake, *Code of Honor: The Making of Three Great American Westerns* (New York: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2003): 7.

would always maintain that the movie was about McCarthyism and the blacklist. The context for the writing of *High Noon* reflects an undercurrent of powerful conservative forces at work in Hollywood: though the screenwriter's response (whether audiences interpreted it this way or not) was a decisively *anti*-reactionary one. The town of Hadleyville (America) had dishonoured itself through its cowardice and hypocrisy but, thankfully, the one who stood up for the country's true ideals prevailed anyway—removing and dropping his Sheriff's badge in the dirt in the closing scene. As we shall observe in future chapters, though, Cold War anti-communism which crept into the prevailing Frontier Myth would push Lyndon Johnson toward pursuing the war in Southeast Asia a decade later and ultimately trap him and the nation in a war with no exit strategy.

### **Civil Rights and Feminism in the Celluloid West**

The superwestern that Lyndon Johnson would identify after his presidency as his favourite contains different messages.<sup>185</sup> In *The Searchers* (1956), John Ford—the master of the genre—alters and deepens his ideas about the Western hero and Native Americans. It is not difficult to see how the film's setting of early Texas and its story of hardship and sacrifice would resonate with the Hill Country LBJ. In one key scene of the film, Mrs. Jorgensen—whose family has undergone tremendous hardship in wresting civilization out of the tough landscape—tells her husband: “It so happens we be Texicans. A Texican is nothing but a human man out on a limb.” She concludes her speech by expressing her belief that one day, after the two of them are in the ground, a

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<sup>185</sup> Irv Letofsky, “All the President's Films,” *Austin American-Statesman* (July 4, 1997): G4 in LBJ Library, Reference Files, Favorites (LBJ); Linda Hanson, “Memo for the Record: Favorite Films of LBJ,” October 13, 1993 in *Ibid.*

better life will be enjoyed for their posterity.<sup>186</sup> Here Ford is acknowledging with a sense of honesty that the personal trials and sacrifices made by those who built civilization may only lead to benefits somewhere down the road—*after* the pioneers' lives have been spent. This is a point that LBJ would return to repeatedly during his presidency: that by everyone pitching in together, risking, sacrificing and acting responsibly, Americans could build a greater nation for their children. In accordance with the liberal Frontier Myth which TR had lived out (and promoted as president through policies such as his "Square Deal" and creation of "green" spaces), Johnson likewise envisioned new frontiers of economic advancement and inclusiveness for all Americans. In another Western precursor to the 1960s, the idea of sacrifice for the future was one that LBJ would work into the promotion of his "Great Society" programs; thanks to the spirit of those hearty frontier folk, he would say, America now had the resources and will to create a society as great as the Western landscape itself.

Perhaps Ford's most notable achievement in *The Searchers*, though, and the one that in later years apparently resonated with Johnson and critics of the film alike, is what seems to be his intentional metaphor for African-American/ white relationships in the era of Brown vs. the Board of Education: the Supreme Court's school desegregation case. Shot in the summer of 1955, *The Searchers* was released in May of 1956, just two years after the Supreme Court ruled that separate but equal segregated schooling was in violation of the constitution. As Jim Kitses has argued, *The Searchers* is Ford's most powerful mediation on America's troubled racist history. Alan LeMay's 1954 novel, and the screenplay which followed, were heavily worked over by director Ford to include crucial changes. Until the film version, race was not a substantive issue. But in Ford's

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<sup>186</sup> *The Searchers* (1956), Warner Brothers, Dir: John Ford.

film version, race relations is a focal point for the protagonist Ethan Edward's (John Wayne) intense hatred of Native Americans, his quest to kill his captured and "tainted" niece, Debbie, his scalping of Scar (an absolute violation of the Cowboy Code), and the eventual change of heart Ethan exhibits in sparing Debbie. At the same time, Ford's decision to banish Ethan from the comfort of a home and a family as punishment for his deep-seated hatreds also carry significance.<sup>187</sup> As the film's theme asks: "What makes a man to wander? What makes a man to roam? What makes a man leave bed and board, And turn back on his home?" Ford was a product of his times as we all are. *The Searchers* was structured as a revenge fantasy but then the director turned the story on its head to expose the destructive and self-destructive forces of racism. As President, Lyndon Johnson, a former segregationist, would (not unlike Ford) surprise many, including African-Americans, by using his "bully pulpit" to champion the cause of Civil Rights head on.

*The Searchers* contains some key "lessons" for Americans at mid-century which may also provide further insight into Johnson's choice of this particular Western as his favourite. The character of Ethan represents in so many ways the old, white, male West who reveals racist and patriarchal flaws in America itself, as well as in the character who has been scarred by his immersion into violence on the side of the "lost cause" during the Civil War. In the end, John Ford reclaims this character after many years of prolonged purgatory and suffering. Ethan Edwards finally accepts his racially violated niece, comes to respect his half-breed step nephew (who marries a white girl), and begrudgingly becomes accepting of the fact that the nation is changing around him. Ethan's character, forged in the gun violence of the Civil War, in the end comes to accept

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<sup>187</sup> Jim Kitses, *Horizon's West*, 100.

the multiethnic diversity of the nation so much on the minds of 1950s movie-goers. This transformation, as difficult and painful as it was for Ford's main character, is perhaps metaphorical of the vision that Lyndon Baines Johnson held out for all of America. The profound character development may have even impacted on the usually arch-conservative actor John Wayne himself who named his son Ethan.

The politically liberal stance taken by numerous Western films, TV and radio series in with respect to inclusiveness in the latter part of the 1950s and early '60s is striking. As one editorial insisted, these morality tales "speak a language very close to the heart of the American Dream: the dream of righteousness...a sense of community, the respect for the poor, for the downtrodden, for the tempest tossed."<sup>188</sup>

In adult television and radio Westerns, Native Americans were portrayed more fairly than in the juvenile series and by the late 1950s several series, such as *Gunsmoke*, took up civil rights themes that focused on the mistreatment of American Indians.<sup>189</sup> In one radio episode of *Have Gun Will Travel*, Paladin sides with an Indian, Whitehorse, and his pregnant wife in a confrontation with white racists who are harassing them. At the end of the program, Paladin offers his mercenary fee of \$2,000 to the Whitehorse family with an apology for white racism: "Please accept it for your child, with my apologies for this imperfect world we have to offer him, and my hopes for a better one in his lifetime."<sup>190</sup> Related to this development was the more general theme of

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<sup>188</sup> William F. Rickenbacker quoted in MacDonald, *Television and the Red Menace*, 143.

<sup>189</sup> Some excellent examples of these can be accessed through the Internet Archives including the *Gunsmoke* radio series with William Conrad as Marshall Dillon episode "Speak Me Fair" which aired on 12/02/56.

<sup>190</sup> J. Fred MacDonald, *Don't Touch That Dial! Radio Programming in American Life, 1920-1960*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1979 (page numbers not provided). Online: < <http://jfredmacdonald.com/prologue.htm> > (accessed 15 August 2014).

brotherhood. In *Dr. Six-Gun*, even animals took up the cause when a pet raven kept reminding viewers that “all men are brothers.”<sup>191</sup>

Liberal feminism in Fifties Westerns has also been the subject of considerable discussion among analysts of the genre. In *West of Everything* (1992) Jane Tompkins, Professor of English at Duke University, explores what she considers the Western frontier genre’s major characteristic: a preoccupation with male violence and female subordination. The genre, she writes, has nothing to do with the West but “is about men’s fearing of losing their mastery and hence their identity.”<sup>192</sup> The Western, then, is a male response to female culture. I find her chapter length descriptions of Owen Wister, Zane Grey and Louis L’Amour quite compelling. Certainly the social environment of the late nineteenth century, with help from Theodore Roosevelt’s own persona (Chapter I), helped to create the right conditions for setting up masculinity as a key facet of the Frontier Myth. But Tompkins is somewhat less convincing in her handling of assorted films, mostly from the post-WWII era which do not fit as well with the assertion that they are a reaction to Victorian values. And if the marginalization does apply in many Westerns of the postwar years there are notable exceptions: Barbara Stanwyck in practically any Western she made from *The Furies* (1950) to *Cattle Queen of Montana* (1954, and co-starring Ronald Reagan) does not fit the female subordination role at all. Tompkins also fails to note and recognize that Kathleen Hite was the most popular and arguably the best writers of the *Gunsmoke* TV episodes and that she infused them with liberal feminist and inclusive themes.<sup>193</sup> The deadly gunman

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<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>192</sup> Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992): 45.

<sup>193</sup> Kathleen Hite (1917-1989), Writer, *IMDb database*, online at <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0386928/> (accessed 16 February 2016).

Shane (Alan Ladd), meanwhile, hardly represents overt masculinity with his supersized horse (or undersized rider) and his fringed and dudified clothing. This said, the perceived need for masculine dominance is an idea which does appear to have held a particular grip not only on Theodore Roosevelt at the turn-of-the-century but, as will be demonstrated, on Lyndon Johnson as well. Interestingly, both of these presidents supported liberal, even feminist causes in certain respects, but their adherence to the Frontier Myth also contained patriarchal (and in TR's case, Victorian) elements that reflect how the myth itself had become a kind of battleground between liberal and conservative elements on issues such as collectivism versus individualism, regulation versus corporate power, civil rights versus segregation, and feminism versus the celebration of virile and paternalistic masculinity. Tensions between "progress," both social and technological, versus a nostalgic and pastoral longing for "the good old days," framed a political battleground as well.

### **Technology and the Frontier: From Lindbergh to Sputnik**

During the postwar years Americans came more and more to envision themselves as frontier folk, pioneers, and cowboys. In fact, these ideas had engrained themselves so deeply into the popular mind that for individuals and new communities, incorporating them into their identities had seemed to become what cultural historians have characterized as "an unthinking act."<sup>194</sup> In the twentieth century, this often resulted in crossover comparisons between the old pastoral frontier and advancement of new technologies. As Leo Marx contends, Americans wanted to have their cake (the garden)

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<sup>194</sup> John M. Findlay and Bruce Hevly, *Atomic Frontier Days: Hanford and the American West* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011): 99.

and eat it too in order to square the machine with the pastoral ideal. Sometimes this even resulted in drawing direct comparisons between these two seemingly incompatible aspects of American life.

As discussed in the previous chapter, for Theodore Roosevelt a fascination with both the frontier values and new technologies held center stage. As President, TR embraced and actively engaged with numerous inventions of his day from the motion picture camera to submarines to the Wright Flyer. Roosevelt had spoken of combining the older values with the new technology and thus enabling Americans to take on the great challenges and adventures that lay ahead in the twentieth century.

News of Charles A. Lindbergh's trans-Atlantic flight from New York to Paris in 1927 provoked numerous responses celebrating the kinds of frontier characteristics portrayed by artist John Gast, described by historian Turner, and put into action by President Roosevelt. One newspaper in Ohio declared Lindbergh as a "self-contained, self-reliant, courageous young man [who] ranks among the great pioneers of history."<sup>195</sup> Theodore Roosevelt's son and namesake, Colonel Theodore Roosevelt, told reporters at Oyster Bay that "Captain Lindbergh personifies the daring of youth. Daniel Boone, David Crocket [sic], and men of that type played a lone hand and made America. Lindbergh is their lineal descendant."<sup>196</sup> And *Outlook* magazine (in a piece that could have been written by its former associate editor, TR, Sr. himself) asserted: "Charles Lindbergh is the heir of all that we like to think is best in America. He is of the stuff out of which have been made the pioneers that opened up the wilderness, first on the Atlantic Coast, and then in our great West. His are the qualities which we, as a people,

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<sup>195</sup> Ohio newspaper column quoted in John William Ward, "The Meaning of Lindbergh's Flight," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (1958): 9.

<sup>196</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., quoted in *Ibid.*



must nourish.”<sup>197</sup> Other frequent metaphors describing Lindbergh’s adventure included the claim that he had opened a new “frontier.”<sup>198</sup> The significance of the frontier in American history had thus been expanded to include products of a highly industrialized, urban society. This connection between modern technology and the frontier would influence and be emphasized not only by TR but by later presidents who are the subject of this study.

During the early years of the Cold War, the city of Richland, Washington was created as a company town whose residents made explosives: or more precisely worked at the Hanford atomic facility which produced plutonium for making atomic and later nuclear bombs. In the 1940s and ‘50s townsfolk almost immediately took on the identity of frontier folks who espoused liberal, progressive, and conservative values along with other mythic visions related to technology that could be applied to most Americans at mid-century. Richlanders declared themselves to be modern American pioneers whose own movement westward helped fulfill the nation’s Manifest Destiny and, in doing so, they envisioned themselves as bearing personal burdens and sacrifices for the betterment of the country and future generations.<sup>199</sup> Historians John M. Findlay and Bruce Hevly have described in detail how this played out during the city of Richland’s “Atomic Frontier Days,” an annual event scheduled for the Labor Day weekend. Townsfolk in attendance were encouraged to act and dress like pioneers of the Old West as parade floats sauntered by celebrating the “natural” progression from wagon trains to atomic power.<sup>200</sup> The “Atomic Frontier” connected the past to the future and its annual festival honoured the communities’ supposed similarities to “the mining and lumbering

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<sup>197</sup> *Outlook’s* editor quoted in *Ibid*, 9-10.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

<sup>199</sup> Findlay and Hevly, *Atomic Frontier Days*, 76.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid*, 101.

towns of the early West.”<sup>201</sup> Richland residents imagined themselves to be full participants in conquering “the Atomic Wilderness on this, our last frontier.”<sup>202</sup> In this way Richlanders could not only take on the personas of earlier generations but also saw themselves as forward-looking innovators. As Findlay and Hevly explain: “They used frontier imagery to comment on the rapid pace of change in front of them, and commended themselves for their role in shaping that change and, with it, the future. Existing on the cutting edge of industry and technology meant that Richland was pioneering tomorrow.”<sup>203</sup> Turner’s “masterful grasp of material things...powerful to effect great ends” and the pioneering past were thus mutually reinforcing.<sup>204</sup>

As we shall see in future chapters, and not without some irony, the intertwining of the frontier past and technological future that began with Theodore Roosevelt would become a prominent idea in the minds of Cowboy Presidents Lyndon Johnson and, in some respects, Ronald Reagan. When the USSR sent its trash can-sized satellite Sputnik into orbit in 1957, it challenged America’s view of itself as the world’s pioneer leader in technology. “Americans were suddenly jarred out of what the British writer C.P. Snow called their ‘technological conceit’ which was based in part on the belief that science and totalitarianism were incompatible.”<sup>205</sup> Risk, progress, democracy and success were all integral elements of the Frontier Myth and needed to be perpetuated. The vision’s power to persuade would soon be demonstrated through the major role it played in bringing

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<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>204</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962): 57.

<sup>205</sup> John N. Wilford’s paraphrasing of C.P. Snow’s comment appears in Susan K. Opt, “American Frontier Myth and the Flight of Apollo 13: From News Events to Feature Film,” *Film and History*, Vol. 26, Nos. 1-4 (1996): 42.

the entire NASA program into being in 1958, a development we shall return to in Chapter V of this dissertation.<sup>206</sup>

### **The Sci-Fi Frontiers and Dynamic Tensions within the Myth**

The period of the 1940s and 1950s is often referred to as the Golden Age of Science Fiction. With respect to the Frontier Myth, as the heroes of these stories moved into and occupied allegedly empty spaces, it was again the story of the advance of civilization in the struggle with a new wilderness, with Indigenous aliens, and cruel villains. Science fiction frequently worked off of the same kind of imperial formula found in Westerns including the theme of expansion across the continent, what was known and what was unknown, and a nostalgic past entwined with an eternal future. Carl Abbot correctly demonstrates how widely read sci-fi anthologies of the 1950s with titles such as *Frontiers in Space*, *Beachheads in Space* and *The Space Frontier* led their audience to the seemingly natural assumption that space travel and exploration “worked” just like the nineteenth century frontier that they had become so familiar and comfortable with. As Abbot contends: “Science fiction extends western openness to infinity, from cold desert surfaces of the moon or Mars to the wide-open spaces of entire galaxies, making the western plains and desert actually as well as metaphorically boundless and extending their possibilities and dangers to the ends of the imagination.”<sup>207</sup> By mid-century the American colonial-style adventures of Hawkeye and the Virginian were transferred to outer space where once again, men and women set out on missions, such as that of *Star Trek’s* Starship Enterprise of the 1960s, to “explore strange new worlds”

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<sup>206</sup> This assertion is also made by Opt, “American Frontier Myth and the Flight of Apollo 13,” 42.

<sup>207</sup> Carl Abbot, *Frontiers Past and Future: Science Fiction and the American West* (Lawrence KS: University of Kansas Press, 2006): 12-13.

and “seek out new life and new civilizations.” Robert A. Heinlein wrote a great deal about pioneering life on other planets in novels such as *Red Planet* (1949), a story about immigrants to Mars, and *Farmer in the Sky* (1950), featuring a family that moves to Ganymede. In *The Martian Chronicles*, Ray Bradbury writes an outer space version of American expansion into the frontier west, with Martians serving as stand-ins for Native Americans, displaced and marginalized by pioneers. Humans pushed out into the galaxy to explore all new adventures involving the meeting of civilization and savagery, heroes and heroines, interplanetary settlers, and a plethora of challenges. These outer space frontier-folk often grappled with the same kinds of issues concerning conquest, setting up communities, and progress that the pioneers out West had faced. But now the conventional frontier setting became virtually endless.

Leo Marx’s identification of the *Machine in the Garden* as a central tension in American culture has in one sense been reconciled through science fiction. In describing an alien future, literary scholar Gary Wolfe articulates a phenomenon that amounts to a clear continuation of Americans’ obsession with the frontier out West as:

an arena for the kind of heroic individualism that increasingly seemed to be disappearing in the urbanized and industrialized East. With the closing of that frontier, the popular audience sought promises of yet new areas to explore, and science fiction gained popularity as a kind of literature which not only offered new frontiers but did so without sacrificing the technological idealism that had equally come to characterize industrial America. Science fiction offered its audience both the machine and the wilderness.<sup>208</sup>

Other tensions that science fiction explore are also remarkably similar to those ongoing tensions of the Frontier Myth. The conflict between individualism/self-reliance and

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<sup>208</sup> Gary Wolfe quoted in *Ibid*, 28.

community frequently emerges along with the question: is it better for individuals to break away from their community in favour of freedom and self-reliance, or should they remain within a connected and helpful support system? The answer is not always clear in Sci-Fi since heroes often break away from some communities but then discover or help create new ones. On TV's *Star Trek*, the Enterprise's crew became a true community in itself, where personnel support each other through dangerous weekly adventures on strange new worlds. Conversely, *The Prisoner* TV series featured a retired spy, "Number Six," a tough individualist who finds himself imprisoned in a secret "Village" where an unidentified organization attempts week after week to break his will in their cruel efforts to learn the true motives behind his resignation. In another example of this dichotomy, while outer space miners in the "space western" *Moon Zero Two* (1969)<sup>209</sup> are shown to fight as a community for their mining rights just as settlers in the early West allegedly hung together to defend their land and new life on the American frontier, the cowering miners of Jupiter's moons in *Outland* (1981) must rely, pathetically, on one tough and self-reliant Marshal (Sean Connery) engaged in a lonely crusade against corruption and murder.<sup>210</sup> Another of the myth's key tensions, the impact of social and technological change on people's way of life, though often portrayed in a positive light, could sometimes have apocalyptic implications as well. Underground frontier stories such as Daniel F. Galouye's *Dark Universe* (1961)<sup>211</sup>, for example, describe the plight of desperate settlers who are forced to migrate below the surface following a nuclear war.

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<sup>209</sup> *Moon Zero Two* (1969), Warner Brothers, Dir: Roy Ward Baker.

<sup>210</sup> *Outland* (1981), Warner Brothers, Dir: Peter Hyams.

<sup>211</sup> Daniel F. Galouye, *Dark Universe* (New York: Bantam Books, 1961).

In a famous quote from the mid-nineteenth century, Henry David Thoreau stated that his feet always took him westward when he went outdoors for a walk, since “the future lies that way and the earth seems more unexhausted and richer on that side.”<sup>212</sup> In the American mind, the West had long been about abundance, challenges and possibilities. Territorial, military and economic expansion into the Pacific, meanwhile, was a major goal of many American presidents—including Theodore Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson. Likewise science fiction often built on this transition in the history of the United States from an Atlantic to a Pacific orientation, or what Wallace Stegner has called the need for “a different and a larger universe.”<sup>213</sup> The past’s obsessions about a frontier past were thus often extended into the future as were its contested politics.

### **JFK and the “New Frontier”**

President John F. Kennedy (1961-1963) did not care for Westerns; he preferred the slick, “license to kill” image of James Bond. But even the Ivy League Kennedy realized the power of drawing on images from America’s frontier past.

If you landed in the United States at the beginning of the 1960s, you would find the public’s thoughts about the future of their country and the world to be an odd mixture of anxious concern and complacency. A content optimism still lingered from the experience of World War II and from the unprecedented postwar economic boom. But beneath this seeming satisfaction lie an undercurrent of concern about the state of the nation and the world in the coming decade. The Soviets were winning the space race, Fidel Castro’s revolution in nearby Cuba had left a Communist state just 90 miles off of

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<sup>212</sup> Henry David Thoreau quoted in Abbot, *Frontiers Past and Future*, 152.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*

Key West, Florida, there was the Berlin Wall crises of 1961, fear of dominoes collapsing in Southeast Asia, and anxieties over the possibility of a nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union—all of which had Americans on edge. At home, change was also in the air with Civil Rights. At the outset of the new decade, President Eisenhower appeared old, tired and sick. Entering a new decade, many Americans sensed that their nation and their world were about to transform.

JFK's "New Frontier" was the key phrase used in his acceptance speech as the Democratic Party's nominee for President in 1960. Kennedy's program was to be a reaffirmation of some of the values and beliefs central to the Frontier Myth. Americans had previously been challenged to fulfill their manifest destiny and obligation to settle the North American continent. The "motto" of pioneers who settled the west, the candidate declared, "was not 'every man for himself'—but 'all for the common cause.'" These frontier folk "were determined to make the new world strong and free—an example to the world, to overcome its hazards and hardships, to conquer the enemies that threatened from within and without." Kennedy then recalled some of the same ideas that Theodore Roosevelt had tapped into five decades earlier:

Today some would say that those struggles are all over—that all the horizons have been explored—that all the battles have been won—that there is no longer an American frontier....But I tell you the New Frontier is here, whether we seek it or not. Beyond that frontier are uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered problems of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus. It would be easier to shrink from that new frontier, to look to the safe mediocrity of the past, to be lulled by good intentions and high rhetoric....I believe that the times require imagination and courage and perseverance. I'm asking each of you to be pioneers towards that New Frontier....For courage—not complacency—is our need today.<sup>214</sup>

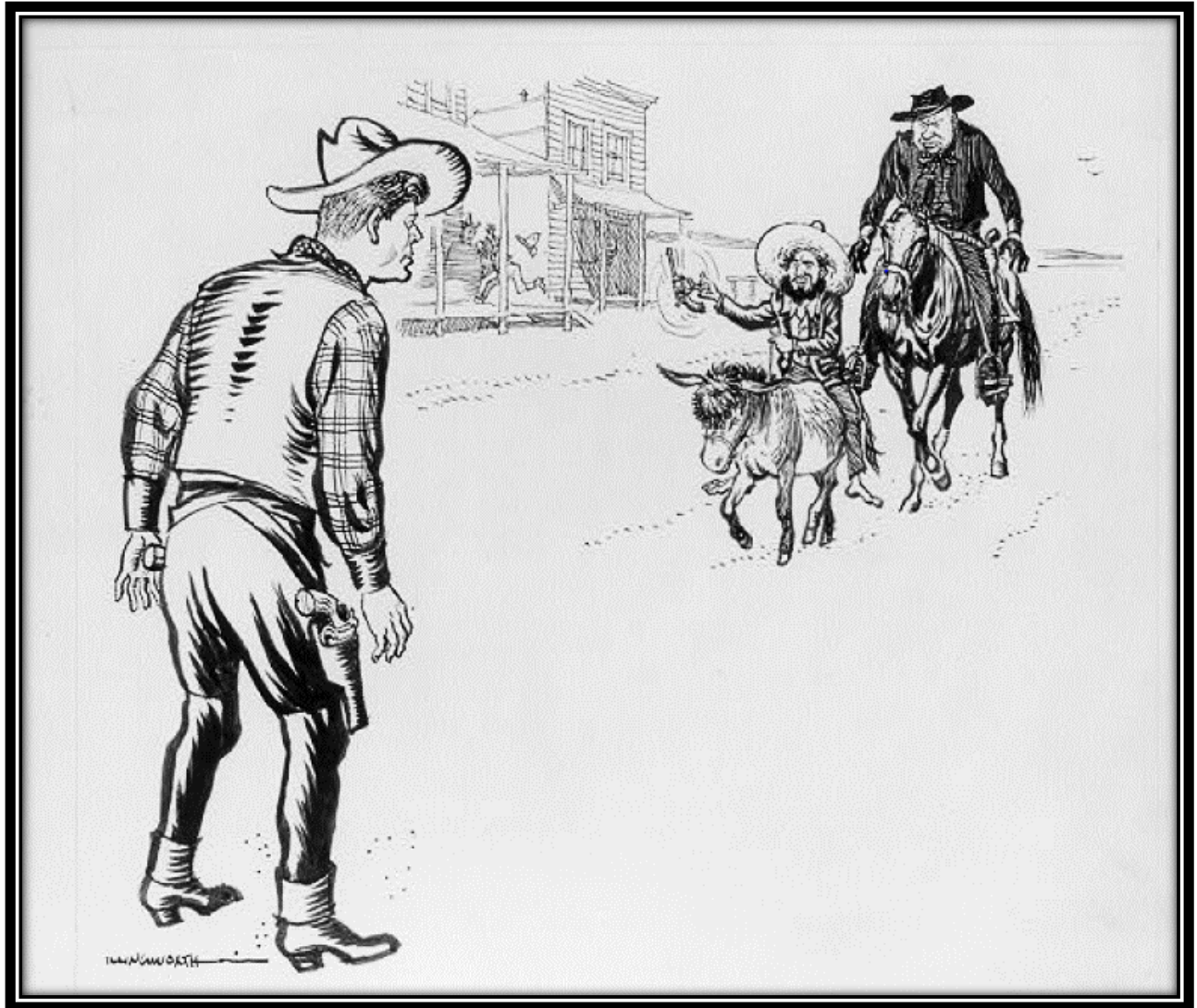
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<sup>214</sup> John F. Kennedy: "Address of Senator John F. Kennedy Accepting the Democratic Party Nomination for the Presidency of the United States - Memorial Coliseum, Los Angeles," July 15, 1960.

Here JFK was picking up on TR and Turner's belief that the frontier and westering experience was not only geographic but an idea that could be applied to social relations, politics and foreign policy: a kind of innovation that was still relevant for the 1960s.

As President, Kennedy's charisma helped his administration implement a new vision where the old values emerged with a reinvigorated sense of virtue from another kind of wilderness. The establishment of the Peace Corps, the Alliance for Progress, Council for Physical Fitness, the space programme—all emerged on Kennedy's watch as his deputies put together a series of initiatives to implement this vision. In hindsight, though, Kennedy's Camelot mystique had a much larger impact on his legacy than did his actual accomplishments. For the most part he was ineffective at persuading Congress to adopt New Frontier legislation, including Civil Rights and anti-poverty programs. JFK's foreign policy, meanwhile, included substantive failures (including the Bay of Pigs and early involvement in Vietnam) along with its successes (most notably, at least in the popular imagination, the Cuban Missile Crisis).





**Figure 3.3:** A rare JFK as cowboy cartoon. Here white hat Kennedy is poised to shoot down bad man Nikita Khrushchev and his gun-twirling, mule riding sidekick, Fidel Castro in “Cuban Missile Showdown.” (Leslie Gilbert Illingsworth, October 5, 1962, SWANN no. 1587, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Reproduced under the Fair Dealing [educational purposes] provision of the Canadian *Copyright Act*)

### **Western Cinema of the Kennedy Years: *The Magnificent Seven***

In October 1960, less than two weeks prior to the Presidential Election, a celebrated and big budget Western landed in American theatres: Director John Sturges’ *The Magnificent Seven*. The film was based heavily on Japanese director Akira Kurosawa’s critically acclaimed and popular film *The Seven Samurai* (1954). As

Kurosawa later said: “All I was doing was trying to make a Japanese Western.” But Kurosawa also added numerous innovations of his own. Essentially, the plots of both *The Seven Samurai* and *The Magnificent Seven* are about how a group of people with a great deal of fighting expertise make use of their talents in the defense of a group weaker than they are. In each case, a village of farmers/peasants harangued by bandits, hires seven professionals to protect them. As in the Western films of John Ford, George Stevens and others, Kurosawa and Sturges’ stories of heroism taught that life should be more about the needs of others than about yourself. Solidarity with others, the heroic Samurai and gunmen demonstrate through their selfless actions and words, is the meaning of life. In both cases, the Seven are magnificent because they follow the codes of “pride” and “honor” rather than acting out of self-interest. In the case of *The Magnificent Seven*, film scholar Kenneth S. Nolley notes that they “speak for the ideals of American democratic society [and] the American liberal tradition.” In a scene near the beginning of the film, veteran Cajun gunslinger Chris (Yul Brynner) takes a stand in defense of an integrated Boot Hill cemetery.<sup>215</sup> Here the frontier values of tolerance and the needs of community transcend those of individualism.

Another key theme in Kurosawa and Sturges’ films of relevance to the Frontier Myth is the fact that the experts in both—the Samurai and the gunmen—are part of a social group that’s time is coming to an end yet they still find a way to be useful. In the world of *The Magnificent Seven*, individualism, violence and gun slinging are becoming increasingly obsolete as the frontier becomes increasingly “civilized”: but this evolving process is not quite complete yet. By compromising their individualism and acting

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<sup>215</sup> Quotation from Kenneth S. Nolley, “The Western as Jidai-Geki,” *Western American Literature*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Fall 1976): 235.

collectively, Chris and his men can use their violence one last time for good—in the cause of defending the Mexican village—before the gunmen become truly redundant. To be successful they work as a collective and re-direct their violence away from self-serving goals to altruistic ones. The better world that they create for the Mexican villagers in the town is a metaphor for the future of America, where individualism and raw violence will be displaced by collective help and support not only for whites but for visible minorities as well. Unlike 1950's Davy Crockett and Jim Bowie, the Seven do not take over the lands of Hispanics, instead these early Sixties heroes make this Mexican community across the border safe for the Hispanics themselves. In the end, then, the film's power is its remarkable ambiguity: a balancing of conservative nostalgia for a disappearing way of life along with liberal foresight for an inclusive and collective future.

### **John Ford's Revisionist Vision of the West: Nostalgia and Progress**

As Paul Monaco observes in *History of the American Cinema: The Sixties*, a shift in the American Western, somewhat modest at first, toward the themes of alienation and resistance to modern authority, pushed the basic formulas and conventions of the traditional horse operas to reinterpret the western frontier as a lost ideal.<sup>216</sup> This shift set the stage for what was to come in the Seventies: a re-orienting of the Frontier Myth in American politics from a predominantly liberal vision to a conservative one.

The initial change in the cinematic tone and interpretation of the frontier West from the end of World War II through the early 1960s is perhaps best demonstrated by

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<sup>216</sup> Paul Monaco, *History of the American Cinema: The Sixties, 1960-1969*, Vol. 8 (New York: Scribner, 2000): 179.

comparing two of John Ford's most famous films, *My Darling Clementine* (1946) and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962). While both films feature similar storylines, their mood and message is different. *Clementine* and *Liberty Valance* explore Ford's vision of America's mission to civilize the wilderness without removing the positive elements of wilderness from civilization. Both postwar Westerns accommodate liberal and conservative elements. But here, as film scholars Mike Yawn and Bob Beatty assert, one finds a rather stark contrast between the forward-looking optimism that pervades *My Darling Clementine* and the darker pessimism that backgrounds *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*.<sup>217</sup>

In *Clementine*, town Marshall Wyatt Earp is able to achieve a successful balance of order and liberty. Here Ford delivers the message that, as in World War II, the rule of law will prevail over tyranny, religion over barbarism, and the qualities of rugged individualism and unity of community can coexist. In this early postwar vision, the West can be civilized without giving up the positive qualities of the frontier that make Americans unique in the world. To be more specific, the best qualities of the East and the West come together in the figure of Earp. Here, film scholar Robert Lyons writes, "Ford reveals his confidence about American by emphasizing Earp's Western values, tempered by respect for those of the East."<sup>218</sup> The bright, symbolic scene of the dance between Earp and Clementine is a kind of celebration of a rebirth for the citizens of Tombstone. The scene comes at the crucial transformation stage of the film where the civilizing symbol of the church is being constructed and just before the savage Clantons are destroyed at the OK Corral. In their study of John Ford, Joseph McBride and

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<sup>217</sup> Mike Yawn and Bob Beatty, "John Ford's Vision of the Closing West: From Optimism to Cynicism." *Film and History*, Vol. 26 (1996): 6-19.

<sup>218</sup> Robert Lyons, ed. *My Darling Clementine* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1984): 17.

Michael Wilmington writes of the dance scene: “In this glorious moment, the infant civilization draws its first pure breath of optimism. Without quite realizing what he has done, Wyatt Earp has hewn a garden out of the wilderness.”<sup>219</sup> Earp’s heroic status has become almost godlike, setting the stage for the gunfight a few minutes later as he and his companions destroy the Clantons. When Wyatt departs, he has transferred custody of the town to Clementine Carter and the other good citizens while he moves on to tame another town.

Henry Fonda’s Earp, then, was Ford’s affirmation of American society as one that could both achieve civilization and progress while at the same time retaining those Turnerian qualities that had made the nation both great and exceptional. John Ford’s West was the best place on Earth where the noble frontier traits of freedom, individualism, self-reliance, and American “know how” could synthesize with civilization into a purely American character, just as Wister had done with his Virginian.

Of course, Ford’s movie-west, a key product and promulgator of the Frontier Myth, ignores the historic “reality” of a west of American violence and wars inflicted on indigenous populations, wars of expansion against Mexico in the southwest (1846-1848), and the inherent racism in the savagery versus civilization dichotomy; the focus instead is on the self-serving idea of American exceptionalism. Ford, like most of his fellow postwar Americans, had accepted the idea that the United States had fought Indians and Mexico and acquired the Southwest in self-defense (just as it had reacted in response to Nazi expansion in Europe and Japanese treachery at Pearl Harbor in World

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<sup>219</sup> McBride and Wilmington quoted in Yawn and Beatty, “John Ford’s Vision of the Closing West,” 15.

War II); but as historian Mark Anderson observes “the evidence shows precisely the opposite.”<sup>220</sup>

The structure and plots behind *Clementine* and *Liberty Valance* are remarkably similar. Both films address the tension between the individual and the community or, in the broader sense, between individualism and community. Yawn and Beatty point out that, in fact, the latter film can be viewed as a remake of the former. But a comparison of the nuances of both films reveal some starkly different visions of the West and of America as a whole.

Ford filmed *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* in black and white and almost entirely within Paramount Studios—though he had used colour film and magnificent vistas throughout the 1950s—because he wanted to create a darker, more claustrophobic and anachronistic work. The menace of progress had apparently hit home for the aging director. Ronald L. Davis writes in his study *John Ford: Hollywood’s Older Master* (1995) that “No longer did he feel like celebrating the course of civilization, which he accepted, but did not necessarily see as progress.”<sup>221</sup>

The movie’s sadistic villain, Liberty Valance (played by Lee Marvin), beats Rance Stoddard (Jimmy Stewart) senseless because he represents his greatest fear: the arrival of civilization. Valance must crush everything that Rance represents: his Eastern ways, knowledge learned through books, and the law. But in an interesting twist, if there is a genuine parallel of characters it is between the hero, Tom Doniphon (John Wayne), and Valance. Both are frontier types living in a world where: “Out here a man settles his own

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<sup>220</sup> Mark Cronlund Anderson, “The U.S. Frontier Myth, American Identity and 9/11,” *Journal of Psychohistory*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Spring 2011): 321.

<sup>221</sup> Ron Davis quoted in *Ibid*, 10.

problems.”<sup>222</sup> What separates the two is Doniphon’s ability to make decisions based on morality while Valance is driven by greed and a desire to commit evil. In time, after arriving in Shinbone, even the bookish Stoddard comes to the realization that principles on their own will not put an end to the barbarity of Liberty Valance. Before long, the lawyer attempts to take on popular frontier-type qualities as were described by Turner, including: “the practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients, that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends.”<sup>223</sup>

In the key sequences, Valance challenges Stoddard to a gunfight for the future of Shinbone—with the code of the west versus civilization (through an election that would grant the territory statehood) at stake. The showdown looks to be a pathetically one-sided affair with Valance mocking Stoddard but then being hit by a bullet that came not from Stoddard as it appeared but, we later learn, from Tom Doniphon across the street. Valance sprawls beneath a sign reading, “Mass Meeting Elections.” The scene is one of historical transition, marking the death of the frontier, and one that impacts on Tom Doniphon almost as swiftly as the terminated Valance. The frontier is no more and with it gone, Doniphon is destined to lose the girl, Halley (Vera Miles), to Stoddard, and degenerate into a figure who now lacks both his power and sense of dignity. In the end civilization is achieved but at a terrible cost: killing its hero, Tom Doniphon, and with it, the spirit and vitality of the frontier. It is a bitter statement about the price of progress as all that is good and honest in frontier life is destroyed. In contrast to Ford’s earlier films, most of which concluded with the theme of glory in defeat, *Valance*’s ending is not romantic or noble at all. Stoddard wins immortality and has risen to the position of a

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<sup>222</sup> *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), Paramount Productions, Dir: John Ford.

<sup>223</sup> Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, 57.

United States Senator but if it were not for Doniphon, Stoddard would be dead. Doniphon, meanwhile, dies a destroyed and forgotten man. Stoddard is honourable and has risen to the position of state Senator, but he is not a hero. When Senator Stoddard tells the story of what really happened on the day of the showdown to the editor of the *Shinbone Star*, the newspaper man, in the end, tears up all of his notes. Stoddard asks: "Well, you're not going to use the story, Mr. Scott?" "No sir," he responds. "This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."<sup>224</sup>

The final scenes drive this point home even further. When Stoddard returns to the room holding Doniphon's coffin he tells Hallie it's time to leave, then notices a cactus rose placed on top of the casket (a symbol of Doniphon's love for Hallie earlier in the film). On the train ride home, as Hallie looks out the window she comments that "It was once a wilderness, now it's a garden. Aren't you proud?" But Stoddard knows who the real hero is and understands that Hallie also knows. Sadly, he asks, "Hallie, who put the cactus roses on Tom's coffin?" "I did," Hallie replies. Nothing more is said between them. The contrast between the glorious and optimistic dance between Wyatt Earp and Clementine Carter and the shot of Stoddard's sickened expression at the end of *Liberty Valance* speak volumes for the different outlooks of the two films.

When Ford filmed *Clementine* in 1946, he appears to have thought that the unique and exceptional qualities of the frontier could continue as a vital part of American life. But by the early 1960s, Ford's optimism had seemingly subsided as had his faith in American values. If at one level, "print the legend" helped to protect the myth of the frontier hero, he was also showing at a deeper level how the legend can destroy the individual. Ford's world had changed around him and at least one of his biographers has

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<sup>224</sup> *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), Paramount Productions, Dir: John Ford.



indicated that Ford was not pleased with what had transpired.<sup>225</sup> Further, film critic and historian Scott Eyman explains that in Ford's later years his own physical health and his spirit was failing.<sup>226</sup>

After having defined the Western for 40 years, John Ford's later films played a significant role in changing the Western genre by inserting dark elements into the Frontier Myth and the fear that the nation was losing those same traits which were believed to have created the American character and made their nation exceptional. *Liberty Valance* lacked Ford's past poetic flourishes and depictions of traditional rituals: instead it affirmed the myth over the real. It was also the closest Ford, a liberal Democrat, would come to an indictment of self-reliance for here it is depicted as "destructive and ultimately self-defeating."<sup>227</sup> Ford, like everyone else, was a product of his times but his questioning of frontier optimism foreshadowed a much more critical, revisionist tide that would sweep through the Western genre at the end of the sixties.

This said, for viewers of *Liberty Valance* in the early 1960s, it still delivered a key message inherent in *The Searchers*, *The Magnificent Seven* and other prominent Western films of the postwar era: that the values of a conservative frontier past—individualism, violence, self-reliance, and American "know how"—could contribute in a meaningful and noble way to the building of a liberal and progressive future.

## Conclusion

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<sup>225</sup> Ronald L. Davis. *John Ford: Hollywood's Older Master* (Norman OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995): 309.

<sup>226</sup> See Scott Eyman, *Print the Legend: The Life and Times of John Ford* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999).

<sup>227</sup> Jim Kitses, *Horizon's West*, 119.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the power of popular culture/media and the Frontier Myth were mutually reinforcing. Through film, television, radio, novels and journalism, the growth of modern mass media in the twentieth century reflected and in turn propagated the myth in American presidential politics and all other parts of American society with a sense of urgency and intensity never experienced before. The code of the West established early in the twentieth century by novelists, movie-makers, and others adjusted in response to the rising influence of technology and the crises of the Great Depression and World War II. In the postwar period, the underlying tensions of the Cold War combined with new forms of media to cause the Frontier Myth to be infused and propagated with particular urgency. In a century that was becoming increasingly complicated, Americans at mid-century found great comfort in the myth. And the more versions of the frontier that were released in various types of media, the more the myth was reinforced. But the myth had also become more complex than in Theodore Roosevelt's day as the experience of the Cold War and other major events saw conservative interpretations often competing with liberal ones. Ambiguity and tensions within the Frontier Myth were accelerating. It would not be until the 1960s, though, that a series of shattering events would come together and cause the traditional myth to undergo a more skeptical analysis followed by a dramatic shift in nature and emphasis for reasons outlined by the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins. The change began modestly in the early 1960s but would prove much more intense in the latter years of the decade.

## IV.

### Lyndon Baines Johnson: Return of a Liberal Cowpoke

Sell the Johnson image....You know, like Marshal Matt Dillon...big, six-feet-three, good-looking—a tall, tough Texan coming down the street.

—VP candidate Lyndon B. Johnson's advice to JFK Press Secretary Pierre Salinger, 1960<sup>228</sup>

If ever there was a president who was larger than life it was the United States' second Cowboy President, Lyndon Baines Johnson. LBJ was so towering, in fact, that he had what some scholars refer to as “two presidencies.”<sup>229</sup> His “first presidency,” from 1963 to 1965, focused on domestic issues and would see LBJ flourish in the presidency as the postwar, liberal Frontier Myth reached the peak of its influence and popularity. The “second” Johnson presidency from 1966 to 1969 (Chapters 6 and 7), however, would place an emphasis on the War in Vietnam—an event so powerful and transformative that the structure of the Frontier Myth as applied by Johnson would collapse under its own weight.

This chapter and the one that follows will examine the “first presidency” including a careful development of Johnson's Western persona (Chapter IV) and his related

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<sup>228</sup> LBJ's “Matt Dillon” quotation appears in Ronnie Dugger, *The Politician: The Life and Times of Lyndon Johnson* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1982): 140, and in Alfred Steinberg, *Sam Johnson's Boy: A Close-Up of the President from Texas* (New York: Macmillan, 1968): 535.

<sup>229</sup> See Roderick P. Hart, *The Sound of Leadership: Presidential Communication in the Modern Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987): 90.

efforts in support of civil rights, anti-poverty programs, and the space race (Chapter V): frontiers where a liberal Democratic cowboy president could draw on the frontier past to craft a new future. The postwar Myth had reached the peak of its power and influence during the early years of the LBJ Administration with the President riding a huge wave of national popularity. Historians have explained this remarkable support as deriving in large part from sympathy for the slain JFK. But this study argues that Lyndon Johnson's adherence to the Frontier Myth structure and deployment of related symbolism played at least as important a role in his initial successes. By tapping into the powerful ideas and symbolism of this frontier-as-America vision, LBJ was able to move more domestic legislation through Congress than at any time before or since. Indeed, it was a rare period when the Federal Government, suddenly, moved as fast and decisively as a Texas Ranger of old.

## **The Hero**

As a youth, Alfred Steinberg writes in *Sam Johnson's Boy*, Lyndon Baines Johnson dreamed of becoming a millionaire, a cowboy hero and a powerful politician. When outside politicians came to Johnson City, Texas, they would often pay courtesy calls on Lyndon's father. Among the names he remembers hearing his father and guests mention on the front porch was that of Theodore Roosevelt. They described with great excitement how TR came to San Antonio to assemble his Rough Riders for the "War of Eighteen and Ninety-Eight." Every afternoon, Roosevelt would come galloping down to the Alamo plaza near the hallowed shrine (which LBJ's father had helped preserve), toss his reins to one of his men, and "plow into the Menger Hotel for his big daily ration of snorts at the bar." On his 58<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1966, President Johnson reminded members

of the press who had gathered at the LBJ Ranch that many of his liberal programs including education, poverty and NYA had been advocated by Theodore Roosevelt. “I am a great admirer of the contributions he made to the Nation,” gushed Johnson, “as you can see reflected in our conservation program....The Presidents of that period and the President of today have a good many things in common—and we are getting some of them done now.”<sup>230</sup>

The editor of the *Texas Observer* was told by LBJ in 1967 that TR was one of his biggest heroes and role models, “a great conservationist...a great cowboy.” Significantly, Johnson admired Theodore Roosevelt first and foremost, not for his charge up San Juan Hill, but for his protection of the wilderness and his “courage to stand up to predatory interests.” Years later LBJ explained to historian Doris Kearns that TR was *the* big local hero and that, “Whenever I pictured Teddy Roosevelt, I saw him running or riding, always moving, his fists clenched, his eyes glaring, speaking out against the interests on behalf of the people.” Johnson greatly admired the cowboy president TR, a man’s man of action, who seemed to epitomize the frontier code as an individual and as a forward-thinking Chief Executive. LBJ staffers later drew similar portraits of their boss to those that Johnson had rendered of TR (LBJ as “a man in a hurry,” of “driving determination; and every time he got interfered with the sparks flew”). Johnson took every opportunity to establish himself in the eyes of the public as a man of the frontier West who, like Roosevelt, could improve the lives of those who had not been given a “square deal” opportunity to improve themselves. Though the Frontier Myth structure had been jostled and undergone some significant changes in emphases since TR’s day, its overall

trajectory had returned to a similar course by the time LBJ became the nation's Chief Executive in 1963.<sup>231</sup>

### **The Pre-Presidential Years: LBJ Goes Western**

Lyndon Johnson was raised in the Texas Hill Country, a region just west of Austin where the agricultural south and ranch country west meet. Over the course of his career the astute future President used this geographic and cultural intersection to full advantage. From Johnson's own actions, and testimonies of his aides, it is clear that in the postwar era he fully understood that a "Western" frontier political image and persona would serve him much better at the national level of politics than a southern one. When Johnson had run locally for Congress and, initially, for the Senate, he emphasized his Southern roots to garner regional support (the "Johnsons" were originally from Georgia); but this changed drastically once LBJ, as Senate Majority leader, began setting his sights on the presidential office.

Senator Johnson's need to remake himself as a Westerner stemmed from his determination to separate his own image from the postwar images of an old, anachronistic and decadent South and connect instead with the West, the region directly associated with the frontier myth experience and seemingly brimming with potential and new developments. During his Senate days LBJ gradually replaced his southernness, a quality that had been crucial in his rise to majority leader, with his

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<sup>231</sup> LBJ quoted in Steinberg, *Sam Johnson's Boy*, 21; *Texas Observer* quoted in Ronnie Dugger, *The Politician: The Life and Times of Lyndon Johnson* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1982): 134; Lyndon B. Johnson, "The President's News Conference at the Ranch," August 27, 1966, *Public Papers of the Presidents*, UCSB American Presidency Project, access at: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=27812#axzz1exdb2JJg> (November 27, 2011); Dugger, *The Politician*, 134 ;Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976): 35; "Sparks flew" description found in Transcript, Gerald W. Siegel Oral Interview II, 6/9/69, T.H. Baker, AC 79-19, LBJ Library: 6.

westernness. Westward expansion had been tied closely to the American creation myth and promoted in the films, TV, and literature which, as explored in Chapter III, were especially prominent in the 1950s and early 1960s. After World War II, the West was booming, seemed new, dynamic and full of promise—and with it the attention to frontiering and the frontier myth re-entered the American consciousness with as much impact as during Theodore Roosevelt’s day. The West (and by implication Johnson) was about the future, the South about the past. In addition to moving away from his southern, regional persona, LBJ would also add the qualities described in Turner’s frontier thesis such as freedom, individualism, self-reliance and honor to his range of imagery. It was a transformation that was crucial to LBJ’s rise to national leadership and to his apparent ultimate goal of the presidency.

In 1957, an aide of Senator Johnson’s sent him a memo offering her boss some sage advice: “Western Films and Stars are very popular right now as you know,” she wrote. “And I can’t think of a more perfect *Western Star* than the tall, dark and handsome, horse-riding, gun-toting-shootin’ ’n huntin’ Lyndon Johnson of the Hill Country of Texas.” The aide conjured up the idea for an episode of the popular TV show, *This Is Your Life*, in which LBJ would be the lead rider “in a cloud of dust...coming over the rise from...in back of the ranch house.” Then she provided what was perhaps the most compelling rationale for the creation of a new LBJ. “This kind of appearance would...discredit those who write of you as a *Southerner*.” No Southerner had prevailed in a presidential election since before the Civil War and Lyndon Johnson, and his staff, knew what he needed to do.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library, Pre-Presidential Memos, Box 6. Memo’s contents quoted in William E. Leuchtenburg, *The White House Looks South* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2005): 272.

During his first two decades in Congress and the Senate, from 1937-1957, Johnson had voted as a white Southerner, with other Southerners, 39 times on civil rights issues; including 6 times against proposals to abolish the poll tax, and twice against legislation to prohibit and punish lynching. But by the late 1950s, Senate Majority Leader Johnson had pulled up anchor from his Southern sensibilities to pursue the broader goals of national politics. Now Johnson increasingly embraced and projected the mythic image of an iconic western frontier rancher, supporting the Civil Rights Act of 1957 and arguing that if Democrats did not support the bill they would pay for it at the polls during the 1958 Congressional elections. Since World War II and the fight against the racial oppression of Nazi Germany, America had been moving further away from its “Gone with the Wind” image of the South, embracing instead the much more inclusive image of frontier western democracy. LBJ’s actions indicate that he sensed this change in mood and adjusted his own political image and actions accordingly. In what appeared to some as a complete turnaround, he now tried to convince his old friend Senator Richard Russell of Georgia and other Southern Senators in 1957 and 1960 that the time had at least come not to *oppose* civil rights legislation. This reorientation for Johnson—most clearly demonstrated by his creative and successful support as Majority Leader for the Civil Rights Act of 1957—was an act not of the stereotypical hotheaded, emotional Southerner, but of a determined, pragmatic Westerner. LBJ had given up his twenty years as an Old South segregationist and attached himself instead to the values of the postwar Frontier Myth—playing to a *national* audience rather than a regional one. Moderate columnist Roscoe Drummond concluded that: “Because he [LBJ] voted for and is an architect of the right-to-vote law, he is the first Southern Democratic leader since the Civil War to be a serious candidate for the presidential nomination.” Johnson



built on this momentum in 1959 when he shifted his membership from the southern caucus to the caucus of Western Democrats. More and more Lyndon Johnson appeared in front of the media wearing his Stetson and boots while riding on horseback. Pushed by national changes in attitudes toward race relations (including, quite possibly, his own) and enticed by the looming Presidential campaign, he broke repeatedly with his Dixie cronies until, in 1960, he opposed them by voting in the affirmative on eight roll call votes *for* civil rights. Johnson was at work to form an interregional consensus that would benefit his own national aspirations and looked toward the future rather than the past. In so doing, he became a national figure tied to the frontier mythic West.<sup>233</sup>

A key aspect of Lyndon Johnson's growing reliance on the Frontier Myth structure, and the related increase in his national appeal, involved emphasizing *personal*, cultural connections with the West through his dress, speeches, published writings, campaign literature, and the extensive development of the LBJ Ranch near Austin. Bedecked in Western wear and relaxing at his 2,700 acre spread, the Hill Country Texan attempted to rid himself of his magnolia scent (at least outside of Dixie) and intentionally looked and played out the role of a Westerner during the years immediately leading up to, and including, his terms as Vice President and President. Overnight, it seemed, LBJ began authoring articles that appeared in journals such as *The Cattleman* with the Senate leader promoting the importance of federal support for misunderstood ranchers out West. Georgia Senator Russell's executive assistant, William Jordan, described the puzzling dilemma in Dixie: "Senator Johnson came here a Southern Senator, but then

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<sup>233</sup> Johnson's membership switch is discussed in Stanley Walker, "Is Texas 'South', 'West', Both or More?" *New York Times Magazine* (April 12, 1959): 35-36 in LBJ Library, Reference Files; for additional details on Johnson's voting record see: Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President 1964* (New York: Atheneum Press, 1965): 252-253; Roscoe Drummond quoted in Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*, Volume 3. *Master of the Senate* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2002): 1008-1009.

all of a sudden he began to claim he was Western senator. Texas was no longer a 'Southern' state, it was a 'Western' state. As time moved on and Senator Johnson's career developed, he became a 'Westerner'." Jordan added that by the late 1950s, "Senator Johnson was a Western Senator...self-described."<sup>234</sup>

In the final years of the Eisenhower Administration several members of the press corps, also caught up in the power of the frontier paradigm, bought fully into the new Johnson as cowpoke image. In early 1959, Stewart Alsop of the *Saturday Evening Post* reported that the "country around the LBJ Ranch was the true American frontier, and there is still a smell of the vanished frontier about it." The LBJ Ranch, meanwhile, "could be rented out as a background for a Wild West movie, and the ranch house itself is most decidedly a Western ranch house—it has nothing at all in common with the pillared and magnolia-draped Southern plantation house of tradition." Alsop, a favourite journalist of Johnson's (and spotted from time to time lounging in the Johnson's kidney shaped swimming pool) then applied "the smell of the frontier" to LBJ himself. "The closeness of his frontier background," he contended, "also explains a good deal of things about Johnson—the restless optimism of the man, and also the roughness and rudeness of which he is markedly capable....These... are the first three things to understand about Johnson—that he is a frontiersman by instinct, with the roughness and restlessness of the frontier; that he is a Westerner at heart rather than a Southerner; and that he is driven and harried by the need to succeed." Here, in Alsop's vision of Johnson, was the Frontier Myth once again personified in a major political figure. With the passage of the Civil Rights bill, his full-on cowboy imagery, and a ranch to bolster his

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<sup>234</sup> See, for example, Senator Lyndon B. Johnson, "Cattle Industry Needs Greater Public Understanding," *The Cattleman* (May 1957) in LBJ Library, Reference Files; William H. Jordan Interview, Miller Center, University of Virginia, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Oral History Project, December 5, 1974: 12.

credentials, LBJ remade himself into a national politician based on the Frontier Myth. Enhancing national, forward thinking aspirations symbolized in values of the postwar myth—optimism, determined pragmatism, expanding opportunity, promise of prosperity for all, conservation of America’s “wild” spaces, manly toughness, inclusion, democracy, and an obligation to those who had sacrificed (including not only frontier pioneers and those American veterans of all races who had recently defended their nation)—as opposed to the widely perceived backwardness of the South with all its race problems and seemingly feudal social and economic circumstances, LBJ now allied himself with a different set of concerns than those which predominated regional, Southern politics.<sup>235</sup>

Johnson’s identity-switching effort to shake off the burden of section was not all smooth sailing in the years leading up to his national bid, though. George Reedy, Johnson’s staff director in 1959, described his own preference for presenting Johnson “as a western candidate rather than a southern candidate” in order to “break the so-called southern mold.” As Reedy recalled:

At that particular point, coming from a Confederate state was not a very good platform as a spring toward the presidency, and, God, it kept bobbing up all over the place. I’ll never forget one of the meetings on the way back he [LBJ] decided to land in Las Vegas to spend the evening. That was very popular with the press, they wanted to see Las Vegas. And, damn, we walked into the hotel and they had a review “Save Your Confederate Money. The South Will Rise Again.” And that stupid bastard of a publicity man for the hotel kept trying to point out to me what a great picture it would make of Johnson alongside of this Confederate general. You know, with ten newspapermen standing there! I could have broken his neck. I would have if the newspapermen hadn’t been there. It was just something hard to shake.”

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<sup>235</sup> Stewart Alsop, “Lyndon Johnson: How Does He Do It?” *Saturday Evening Post*, Vol. 231, Issue 30 (January 24, 1959): 38.

Johnson staffer Gerald W. Siegel concurs that “the word Southern” was “completely obstructive...in politics at that time...an obstacle that somehow had to be overcome.” Like Reedy, Siegel recalls that “obviously the important thing to try to do was to have Mr. Johnson thought of either as a Westerner or at least a Southwesterner. Of course, Westerner was preferable to Southwesterner, and the fact is that he didn’t think like a Southerner.” For Siegel, then, Johnson and his staff’s efforts “to try to shed himself of the burden, especially the Democratic Party political burden of a Southerner” was not simply a deliberate political ploy but something more complex. LBJ and his staff were pursuing liberal and civil rights policies much better attuned with mid-twentieth century Western imagery (and contained within the structures of the contemporary frontier myth) than to the public’s association with the South. To Siegel, Johnson “thought like” a Westerner. His off the cuff assumption that being a Westerner was the most “preferable” of possible identities for his boss, meanwhile, is a telling reflection of the nation’s mindset at that point in time: that the *most* appealing American values and imagery were to be found in the West, or at least in the idea of the West.<sup>236</sup>

Though Johnson did not officially announce himself as a candidate for the presidency until one week prior to the Democratic National Convention in July 1960, LBJ the cowboy had hit the campaign trail long before that. As early as February, *Newsweek* magazine reported that Johnson’s “deputized posse of at least 75 Texas supporters—tall, virile men in boots who booming referred to their leader as “The Great Westerner”” had launched “the great Texas invasion” at Albuquerque’s Western Skies Hotel. The deputies’ occupation had one objective: “To convince Western

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<sup>236</sup> Transcript, George Reedy Oral History Interview XV, 6/23/84, by Michael L. Gillette, Internet Copy, LBJ Library: 29; Transcript, Gerald W. Siegel Oral Interview I, 5/26/69, by T.H. Baker, AC77-17, LBJ Library: 36; Transcript, Gerald W. Siegel Oral Interview II, 6/9/69, T. H. Baker, AC 79-19, LBJ Library: 6.

Democrats at the Western States Democratic Conference that Texan Lyndon Johnson is really one of them—a true son of the purple sage.” The magazine’s editor reasoned that LBJ was trying hard to “shuck off” his Southern ties and persona to throw his lot in with the West. Posing with a Confederate General was poison now but, in contrast, LBJ happily “entered into the spirit of the Western motif” by posing with a burro and waving his Stetson high in the air for photographers. Colorado’s Governor Steve McNichols was reported as saying that “Johnson looked like an honest-to-gosh Westerner.” All this was not lost on editorial cartoonist John R. Fischetti, who drew a tall, lanky Cowboy Johnson leaning, almost *falling*, in the direction of a young “Western Delegates” cowgirl while an infatuated Southern belle—no longer Johnson’s first choice— looked onward from across the room. “There’s plenty of me for everybody,” the cartoon-LBJ still contended. But many culturally conservative, southern Whites would have none of this and soon editors from the former Confederacy were labeling LBJ as an opportunist who had turned his back on the South and adopted a frontier persona and values that directly threatened the very “way of life” he had allegedly been voted in to protect. The *Jackson Daily News* tore into Johnson and his “synthetic Western” campaign in Albuquerque: “Now that he is safely across the border [in New Mexico],” fumed its editor, “we hope he finds comfort in the cactus bed that he has made for himself, sleeping snugly alongside the NAACP, AFL-CIO, the Civil Rights Selfish Committee and a host of other Texas-hating left-wing punks who delight in slaughtering the South in the pious name of tolerance.”<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> “Yippee-i-o Ker-plunk,” *Newsweek* (February 15, 1960): 26; Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Special Files: Cartoon Collection, Box 1, File 1 “Political Issues 1956-1964,” John R. Fischetti, Newspaper Enterprise Association, Chicago Daily News, c1960, exact date unknown; *Jackson Daily News* is quoted in Leuchtenburg, *The White House Looks South*, 274-275.

When all the ballots were counted at the Democratic Party National Convention on July 15, 1960 Johnson finished second to John F. Kennedy in the run for the party's next presidential contender. A substantive proportion of white Southern Democrats were even more shaken by the fact that LBJ then agreed to throw his lot in as a Vice Presidential candidate on the Kennedy ticket. Their "own" candidate had taken up the values of JFK, a liberal New Englander, and of the frontier west, as opposed to those of Johnson's own "homeland." Johnson, they all knew, had come up through the ranks in the South, campaigned as a Southerner (especially in east Texas), and worked in the House and his early Senate days with Southern members more than those from any other region. (Though these observers seemed to forget that Johnson had come to the House not under the auspices of a Southern president but as an ardent New Dealer). Now LBJ was being labeled by these white southerners as a turncoat for embracing the values of inclusion on Civil Rights and for rejecting the symbolism of the Old Confederacy and "state's rights" in favour of the enforcement of rights for blacks and other minorities. Like JFK, and in many respects, TR, Lyndon Johnson was embracing a frontier discourse of social justice, equality of opportunity and democracy that he believed would chart a secure and brighter course for America's future. Attuned with the rest of the nation and its traditions, values and aspirations, Johnson understood the messages and power of the frontier myth at that point in time. As he put it himself, the nation "is moving to the left; you can either move with it or be crushed." In the end, LBJ did not "lose" the South in the process of emphasizing this liberal, national agenda, but his support base among whites in the region was weakened (just as it was strengthened throughout the rest of the country) and, at least as importantly, his decisions and

actions would have long term consequences that continue to impact on the party politics in the South today (a point we shall return to in later chapters).<sup>238</sup>



**Figure 4.1: For the conservative *South* magazine, Lyndon Johnson had become a “political polygamist.”<sup>239</sup>** (“Chapman” cartoon is reproduced under the Fair Dealing [educational purposes] provision of the Canadian *Copyright Act*

<sup>238</sup> For a summary of Southern editorial attacks on LBJ see James Jackson Kilpatrick, Editor, *Richmond* (Va.) *News Leader*, “Lyndon Johnson: Counterfeit Confederate,” *Human Events*, Vol. 17, Issue 34 (August 25, 1960): 373. Trouble on the “turncoat” issue persisted for years to come, see especially: Jack Bell, “Some Old Johnson Friends To Be Missing at Convention,” *The Sunday Star—Washington DC* (August 24, 1964) in LBJ Library, 1964 Democratic National Committee Files, Box 173, LBJ: Democratic Convention Strategy file. LBJ’s “moving to the left” quote appears in Caro, *Master of the Senate*, 1004.

<sup>239</sup> *South* magazine quoted in James Jackson Kilpatrick, “Lyndon Johnson: Counterfeit Confederate,” *Human Events*, 34:17 (August 25, 1960): 374.

from James Jackson Kilpatrick, "Lyndon Johnson: Counterfeit Confederate," *Human Events*, 34:17 [August 25, 1960]: 373)

In the context of the late 1950s American politics and society, Lyndon Johnson understood where the wind was blowing and hoisted his sail. As Senate Majority Leader, the Civil Rights Act had been his signal achievement, the first Civil Rights bill since Reconstruction. The act served as a large step in his transformation from a southern to a Western frontier national figure. Like millions of Americans, including some Southerners, Johnson would clearly associate himself with the principles of the multi-regional frontier myth—a vision in sync in many ways with the New England Senator, John Kennedy, who himself promised "New Frontiers" for America's future. JFK was no cowboy figure for the nation in the literal sense but his running-mate Lyndon Johnson, the "Westerner," surely could be. In 1960, JFK needed LBJ as his running mate at least as much and maybe more than McKinley had needed TR six decades earlier. As the Kennedy-Johnson campaign geared up, LBJ sought to sell the inclusive Democratic ticket by preparing to harness frontier symbolism in a way not seen since TR ran for office.

Of Lyndon Johnson's numerous "cowboy spectacles" of the 1960 campaign—and there were many—one early stunt exemplifies the determination with which LBJ was willing to flaunt his frontier persona and demonstrates the growing national appeal of the Frontier Myth. It happened far from the Hill Country in a region that has always been a world apart from Texas. Elizabeth Rowe, a long-time friend of the Johnsons, describes her experience when she joined Lyndon and his wife, "Lady Bird" Johnson, to begin campaigning for the Vice Presidency in Boston, Massachusetts:



The plane came in, and lined up at the Boston Airport were a dozen and more little dumpy women, all with great big cowboy hats on. They were all the Italian population of Boston, all good Democrats, and all absolutely overpowered by these great big hats....Then we got over to the Copley Plaza. There was a policeman directing traffic on a horse, and [Lyndon] just said to the policeman, "If you will get off that horse, I'll get on." So he got on the horse and pranced around the square a little while. This was the starting of "from Boston to Austin."<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> Elizabeth Rowe Interview, Miller Center, University of Virginia, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Oral History Project, June 6, 1975: 15-16.



**Figure 4.2: VP Candidate Johnson's grin comes across as a bit forced in this photo taken in Boston (perhaps he was calculating the stunt's impact on voters). The commandeered Beantown police horse, meanwhile, appears somewhat ill at ease with its Texas Hill Country rider. (LBJ Library Photo #60-9-26, Date: 09/08/1960. Courtesy of FayFoto, Boston MA)**

Without Johnson's help in squeaking out victories in Texas, key states in the West, and part of the South, JFK would most certainly have gone down to defeat to Richard Nixon in the 1960 race—the closest Presidential contest ever up until that time. By the

slimmest of margins, this odd couple of running mates pulled out the first White House victory for the Democratic Party since 1948.

### **The White House Looks West**

After serving 1,000 days as John F. Kennedy's Vice President, Lyndon Johnson became the second "Cowboy" to be elevated to the presidency following a Chief Executive's assassination. The iconography of the American leader from John Fitzgerald Kennedy to Lyndon Baines Johnson changed suddenly and drastically. Johnson had no inclination to copy JFK and the Eastern Establishment "Harvards"—which would not have worked for him anyway—he had something better in mind.

The *Texas Observer*, which had followed Johnson's political career for decades, saw changes coming in its November 29 piece, "President Johnson's Frontiers." The Johnsons were "country people" and Lyndon "the President from the rocky hills where Texas begins to be western." Many of the Harvard-types would have "less to do in Washington now, and different sorts of people, Western sorts, Texas sorts, and moderate Southern sorts will have more to do there." In an article that not only contained the word "frontier" in its title but used it repeatedly in its text, the *Observer* pondered whether LBJ would continue on with his "national" liberal agenda or revert to his more provincial "middish" positions as a southern Senate majority leader. Here the frontier and the west were viewed as accommodating America as a whole, and Johnson the cowboy president, through the deployment of his frontier persona, could seek to craft himself as a truly national president. "President Johnson has his own frontier to remember, and" the *Observer* concluded optimistically, "a great frontier to seek." Similarly, Tom Wicker of the *New York Times* observed that "there are distinctive

things about a him, springing from his environment and the myths and traditions to which it gave birth....For the new President [like TR again] thinks big, in the expansive, can-do, believe-me style of the West.” Journalist Jim Bishop declared that “the 6000 odd acres of hill country which [Johnson] owns are not land and pasture and stone—they are him.” Lady Bird too liked her husband’s front and center frontier persona as the right “type” to lead a grief stricken nation. Once she commented that she sometimes daydreamed that the hero of her favourite TV show, *Gunsmoke* (who Lyndon believed he resembled), visited the LBJ Ranch. While driving past a little house on the edge of the hill Lady Bird told Bishop: “I can just picture Marshal Dillon riding up to that place.”<sup>241</sup>

Just days after Kennedy’s assassination, one presidential advisor recorded how he never forgot the image of a mover at the White House packing up JFK’s trademark rocking chair while another walked in and deposited LBJ’s cowboy saddle. The saddle signaled Johnson’s own attachment to his Western environment and allowed the new president to help project himself as a national leader with a national message that would serve an atemporal and unassailable American agenda embodied in the frontier myth: one that included freedom and equality of opportunity for all people. The testing points of regional (southern) bigotry and economic disparity, under the worn regional voices of mere sections of America could not stand in opposition to a national mandate—and thus self-evident mandate—which included Civil Rights, a War on Poverty, conservation of America’s wilderness, along with the promotion of Turner’s frontier qualities of optimism, progress, and unlimited opportunity. And, as we shall see, the host of federal

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<sup>241</sup> “President Johnson’s Frontiers,” *Texas Observer* (November 29, 1963): 8-9, in the LBJ Library, Democratic National Committee Files, Series 1, Box 148; Tom Wicker, “With Johnson on the Ranch,” *New York Times* (January 4, 1964): E6; Jim Bishop, “A Stay at the Ranch Begins With a Whoop,” *Washington Post* (June 24, 1967): B12.

programs that lay on the horizon in an LBJ Administration would actively and aggressively seek to carry on the alleged achievements of the American frontier experience through the power and will of the national government.<sup>242</sup>

The pervasiveness and persuasiveness of the Frontier Myth meant that—as with the Vanishing American myth—it would consciously *and* unconsciously be understood. Likewise the deployment of the myth’s associated symbolism, whether intentional or not, was a key aspect of its power and influence—and of Johnson’s early success as President. Americans recalled that Owen Wister’s classic cowboy character, the Virginian—foreman at the Shiloh Ranch—was deliberately infused with the values of both the primitive and the civilized, fitting in just as well in the land of the gentlemen of the east (with his tailor and appreciation of the classics) as he did in Wyoming. LBJ projected a similar image that appeared to personify and reaffirm the old values of individualism and self-reliance in a changing “eastern”-directed future. Sometimes this manifested itself in policy but other times this was more aesthetic in nature. *Look* magazine reported, in pictures and words that “As the occasion demands, Johnson can be urbane and sophisticated amid the splendor of his Washington office or ruggedly ‘rural’ as he relaxes on his large Texas ranch.” Bert Niver, head of Niver Western Wear in Fort Worth told the *Wall Street Journal* that LBJ hats “are being seen increasingly on the streets of such cities as New York and Washington.” And *Men’s Wear Magazine* proclaimed that: “The daily publicity of LBJ’s hats will help restore hat wearing...as a masculine act that calls for no apologies.” But it was, above all else, the LBJ Ranch that

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<sup>242</sup> “Lyndon B. Johnson: A Reference Resource,” Miller Center, University of Virginia, Presidential Oral History Project. Online at <http://millercenter.org/president/lbjohnson/essays/biography/2> (accessed 8 November 2011).

offered the most vivid projection of the President in his new role as lead cow man for the nation.<sup>243</sup>

### **Home on the LBJ Ranch**

The LBJ Ranch, purchased in 1951, served Lyndon Johnson as the epitomizing symbol of his frontier persona and policy making. During the 1950s it was the locale LBJ used to hone his political image as he used the Ranch and his own style of “barbeque diplomacy” to highlight his growing identification with the West and the future. In 1959 he purchased a JetStar Aircraft, built a 3,570 foot airstrip at the ranch and laid plans for improved guest rooms designed to accommodate national and international activities. The ranch was being transformed both in the physical and symbolic sense: a reflection of LBJ’s efforts to create a persona conducive to his goals of national office. In Western movies and other forms of popular culture, ranches had become symbolic and a setting that Americans of all regions felt culturally at home with. The frontier experience transcended regionalism and represented what the public initially saw as the quintessential American experience. By owning a ranch, Johnson benefitted from the myth to strengthen his standing with an electorate which increasingly shared the values of the mass media and its infatuation with the frontier myth. Within a few short years he used his new rancher persona and the symbolism of the ranch to help reinvent himself by not only transforming his image from that of a regional to a national figure but by showcasing himself as a self-made man—two themes especially inherent in the Western

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<sup>243</sup>Bill Davidson, “Texas Political Powerhouse: Lyndon Johnson,” *Look* (August 4, 1959) in LBJ Library, Democratic National Committee Files, Series 1, Box 148; Frank Morgan, “The President Sparks a Boom for Producers of Western Outfits: LBJ Hats Show Up in East,” *Wall Street Journal* (March 12, 1965): 1. The official “LBJ Hat” was available from the Triboro Hat Corporation of New York which reported records sales.

myths of the mid-twentieth century. Johnson, it seemed, was never far from his “Heart’s Home.” In his five years as President, Johnson flew to the ranch on 74 occasions and spent about one quarter of his time there.<sup>244</sup>

As explored in Chapter III, Johnson’s rise to national prominence paralleled the rise in the popularity of the “western” and the belief that it represented the national character. Western movies and TV programs encompassed national anxieties and aspirations. The West itself became a kind of parable for American society and the challenges offered up in the past and how Americans resolved these offered ways of dealing with new tensions in the present and of planning for the future. Americans could return to their alleged origins to find the determination and means of facing problems of the modern world. The nation as a whole shifted westward in the postwar years and LBJ plugged into the nostalgia of an older, simpler America. Many of the “American” characteristics described in the Frontier thesis, the qualities self-reliance, hard work, straight-shooting, and the frontier spirit were shown as embodied in the LBJ Ranch. For *Harper’s* magazine, it only seemed natural and “about time” that an “LBJ” ranch-boss of the Texas Hill Country would inhabit the White House. “It strikes one as curious that out of the geography of this great common national romance, the national legend,” wrote Marshall Frady, “out of the landscape of Tom Mix, Randolph Scott, John Wayne, Marshal Dillon—only in this decade did a President finally emerge.”<sup>245</sup>

For Johnson, his purchase of the ranch, the land where he grew up, was symbolic proof that if someone worked hard enough and long enough, and possessed enough will and intelligence, they could reach new heights and put the troubles of the past

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<sup>244</sup>Hal K. Rothman, *LBJ’s Texas White House: “Our Heart’s Home* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2001): 86; Craig Goldwin, “In 1963, A First State Dinner for the Record Books” (November 24, 2009): 2, in LBJ Library, Reference Files, Barbeque file.

<sup>245</sup> Marshall Frady, “Cooling Off with LBJ,” *Harper’s* (June 1969): 69.

permanently behind them. LBJ, so the story went, had purportedly fulfilled all the hopes and dreams of his pioneering ancestors. America was the land of limitless opportunity where enterprising men—like the frontier forefathers—were said to have “made it big” by pulling themselves up out of their lower class status by their bootstraps. LBJ’s portrayal of himself, purposefully or not, as a kind of blending of the elements of James Fenimore Cooper and Horatio Alger was part and parcel of the frontier myth—which featured tough, enterprising pioneers said to have gone West to carve out better lives for themselves, their families and ultimately the nation.

As Ronnie Dugger has contended, LBJ *was* certainly aware that he could enhance his own political posture as a man “rooted in the soil” if he owned a ranch near where he was born. But for Lyndon Johnson, a Texan complete with his Stetson hat, drawl and working cattle ranch (like TR, LBJ had a *working* ranch as opposed to Ronald Reagan’s hobby ranch or George W. Bush’s ranch with no livestock), the West appears to have a connection that was not only opportunistic but was personal and ideological as well. In his 1965 State of the Union address LBJ posed a question to himself on where he found guidance to lead the country, responding that “The answer was waiting for me in the land where I was born.” LBJ’s twentieth century ranching and Western connections were part of his own sense of identity and an apparently genuine belief in: a national mission; a “Golden West” of great wealth and opportunity for enterprising men (like *himself*); and a place of promise and democracy. In short, as with TR, Johnson equated his own sense of identity with that of the nation’s. And, as Marshall Sahlin might explain, it was personal and ideological for LBJ because the frontier experience and its



surrounding myths were so entrenched as the dominant discourse that they explained American society and with that, LBJ himself.<sup>246</sup>

The film about Lyndon Johnson's life still shown at the LBJ National Historical Park (or LBJ Ranch) today emphasizes this frontier "man of the land" theme. *The Hill Country: Lyndon Johnson's Texas* was produced by NBC News and first broadcast on TV on May 9, 1966. In the opening scene the narrator declares: "A land of big skies and long horizons....When the chance comes to refresh his spirit, renew his strength, Lyndon Johnson goes back to the place of his roots. To the people and the land he has known and been part of all his life. The President goes home." LBJ then describes how his own ancestors lived on the edge of civilization and savagery, as Indians attempted to loot and kill at the Johnson homestead. His grandfather drove cattle up the Chisholm Trail to Abilene, Kansas, and would put his guns "there" in the local old fort "used against the Indians" and in detail LBJ conveys how his grandmother, Eliza Bunton, and her child survived an Indian raid on their house. Johnson then describes his hard work ethic as a boy, drilled into him by his father, when he spent the summers on the ranch "riding this pasture from daylight until dark, every day"; and once again how with pluck, hard work and determination anybody could be President. Later in the film, LBJ boasts of his ranch's "revolution with soil conservation" and especially about its access to cheap electric power "that all resulted from the power of government [that is, LBJ] to bring the greatest good to the greatest number." At one point the interviewer asks: "Mr. President, do you suppose that you'll be the last President to come off the land?" to which Johnson responds: "No, I don't think so. I think there is something about the land...that gives you

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<sup>246</sup> Dugger, *The Politician*, 358-359; Lyndon B. Johnson: "Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union," January 4, 1965. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsba.edu/ws/?pid=26907> (accessed April 4, 2012).

an understanding of humanity, and gives you an appreciation of other countries and other civilizations.” Employing Jeffersonian-like ideals, he adds, “I believe that land is our greatest source of wealth and a man who understands and appreciates it would better understand democracy itself, our system of government, and all the people who live on the land.” Here was Turner’s egalitarian democracy springing directly from LBJ’s heartland in the Texas Hills. Here too LBJ’s ranch provided a kind of safety valve from the problems and complexities of the cities, a place where savagery and civilization had once met and improved upon the American, “this new man,” opening up new possibilities of inexhaustible wealth, the promise of new innovations and social improvements all—in the context of the twentieth century—with the helping hand of the Federal government.<sup>247</sup>

“LBJ Country” was not portrayed as anything like Manhattan or Washington DC but a mythic “real” America inhabited by folks who were free from the corruptions of the East, worked the land for a living, and when they shook hands meant business. This “hard scrabble” region provided the perfect stage for the Democratic Party’s liberal programs. Johnson frequently used the Hill Country to illustrate the problems of rural America and the poor. In the *Hill Country* documentary he told viewers that rural electrification of the 1930s had brought some relief and lifted his region into the twentieth century but that much more had to be done there and in the nation as a whole. Johnson regularly cited his experiences as a young man growing up in rural Texas as a kind of cornerstone of the rationale for poverty, social and education programs.

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<sup>247</sup> *The Hill Country: Lyndon Johnson’s Texas*. NBC-TV Special, first aired May 9, 1966 [film shown to visitors to the LBJ National Historical Park near Stonewall, Texas, October 1, 2011].

Of all the programs LBJ thought crucial to the success of the Great Society, education topped the list. The Education Bill of 1965—one of sixty education measures brought in during his presidency and LBJ’s personal favourite—was signed at a ceremony in the Junction Schoolhouse that Lyndon had attended as a boy. For LBJ, education would serve as the great equalizer in American society—giving Americans from even the most impoverished background the chance to “make it” in mainstream society. As such, education served the same purpose as the frontier had in days gone by. He wanted “every child to have all the education he could take.” And his goals included free, public education through college for every child. It epitomized LBJ’s “bootstraps” philosophy that once the friendly federal government stepped to offer a helping hand and level the playing field of opportunity—the trials of the past could be overcome. Alongside these goals, LBJ declared an “unconditional war on poverty,” which he drove through Congress with enormous fanfare. The *Sunday Times* of London commented that “it was perhaps the most bellicose program of social reform in history. It was to be a war on poverty” explained in the media with western metaphors and symbols: “Federal funds were to be ‘fired in’ to the pockets of poverty in what was known in Washington as ‘the rifle-shot approach’.”<sup>248</sup> Along the way, Johnson either imagined or felt the need to exaggerate the poverty of his own youth to achieve these goals because he did so...often. It was a manipulation of Western symbolism that, apart from Ronald Reagan, only LBJ (at least in his “first” presidency) could have pulled off so successfully.

The significance of the LBJ Ranch as a place of “Westernness” and as a *national* symbol was only enhanced by the fact that almost every event held there was quickly

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<sup>248</sup> *Sunday Times* quoted in William E. Leuchtenburg, *A Troubled Feast: American Society Since 1945* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1983); 138.

reported and hyped in the press. The White House Social Files also reveal that before long, churches, rotary clubs and schools from around the country began writing in to Lady Bird's personal secretary enquiring how they could recreate the "Western" LBJ Ranch/BBQ events in New York, Minneapolis, and Massachusetts. A school in Weymouth, MA, staged "Christmas in Texas at the LBJ Ranch" as the theme of its Christmas pageant; while a senior class party in Belleview, Missouri, a Sunshine Club just outside Boston, Fall Fair in Pittsburgh, and an Annual Sports, Vacation and Trailer show in Long Beach, California likewise all planned to host their own faux "Bar-B-Que at the LBJ Ranch" or "Presidential Barbeque...in the old western style" events. Throughout every region of the country, "frontier"/"LBJ" events were being celebrated and embraced.<sup>249</sup>

Recreating one of these BBQ-at-the-Ranch affairs with much accuracy would have made for an expensive undertaking. Richard "Cactus" Pryor—a Will Rogers-like radio personality on the Johnsons' radio station KTBC in Austin—performed the role of master of ceremonies at a dozen or more LBJ Ranch get-togethers. In an oral history interview from September 1968, Cactus describes his colourful experiences at LBJ's "Western" barbeques for a variety of dignitaries and heads of state. Local caterer Walter Jetton would set up his "chuck wagon," portable BBQ pits and a whole beef on a rotating spit (apparently this was for optics as Jetton "use[d] the same beef over and over"), cows staked out on the other side of the river for atmosphere, round tables featured checkered

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<sup>249</sup> LBJ Library, White House Social Files, LBJ Ranch – B, Correspondence from Bess Abell (Lady Bird Johnson's Social Secretary) to Mrs. Eleanor C. Brooks, Weymouth, Massachusetts, December 10, 1965; LBJ Library, Reference Files, Barbeque file, Correspondence from Bess Abell to Mrs. S.P. Hitchings, Belleview, Missouri, April 6, 1965; White House Social Files, Alpha File, Box 1345, LBJ Ranch Barbeque (Only), Correspondence from Bess Abell to Mrs. Rose O. McIntyre, Westwood, Massachusetts, April 14, 1965 in *Ibid*; Correspondence from Bess Abell to Mrs. John A. Odell, Pittsburgh, June 2, 1965 in *Ibid*; Correspondence from Bess Abell to Mr. C. Lynn, Long Beach, California, January 28, 1965 in *Ibid*.

tablecloths and coal-oil lanterns, iron wash pots full of butter were scattered around for guests to dip their corn on the cob, bales of hay were added, and all the helpers dressed in strictly Western attire. “It had all the look and feel,” said Cactus, “of a ‘chuck wagon’ dinner.” For entertainment there was Mary Tuggle, “an expert with a bull whip...She is a very attractive blonde girl, and came riding in on a horse full speed, cracking a whip.” The Johnsons also liked inviting Bill McElroy of the Texas Rangers to put on a pistol-shooting demonstration. Gene Autry, a friend of the Johnsons since the 1940s, and other cowboy stars often attended the Johnson’s barbeques. LBJ himself would typically be dressed in his Stetson poplin jacket, tan sports shirt, boots and spurs. The Johnson staff served up their western barbeque with six-shooter coffee (a brew “so strong it will float a .44”) and passed out numerous gifts. Sometimes the President ordered batches of 300 official “LBJ” Stetson ranch hats to give away, along with western saddles, spurs, and cowboy outfits for adults and kids—one having been fitted out for the 22 month old crown prince of Iran. At an evening with German Chancellor Ludwig Erhard in late December 1963, LBJ presented cowboy hats to all the visitors, “and they put them on to the glory of the Press.” *Newsweek* had dubbed the latter event as “Stetson Statesmanship.” The quintessentially eastern *New Yorker’s* assessment of the LBJ Ranch and the ‘64 Presidential Campaign, meanwhile, was that the LBJ “barbeques as a symbol compare favorably with the 1952 hole in Adlai Stevenson’s shoe.” Again, the cowboy hats, barbeque, and frontier entertainment were not just regional themes they were national themes, the part representing the whole. The Western talk and symbolism reflected the whole country, regardless of regional geography, for in the eyes of Americans and foreign visitors alike the western frontier of the imagination had long since ceased to be so much a location as an idea of a place and time. The myth also

provided guidance to the present generation of Americans as they contemplated the future that they wanted to build.<sup>250</sup>

LBJ, like Theodore Roosevelt and Frederick Jackson Turner, believed that to understand the history of the United States one had to understand the history of the American frontier. In the spring of 1967, Johnson flew 30 Latin Ambassadors from Washington to the ranch for an enormous barbeque bash that would include LBJ's vision of the Frontier Myth. Cactus Pryor describes how the President hired actors to "perform" re-enactments of the settlement of the West to the amazed foreign dignitaries, friends and the press. "The Fandango" featured buckboards, stage coaches, a calliope pulled by horses..."they have Indians and battles, the whole thing you know." The actor-Spaniards came down the Pedernales first with friars and Indians meeting them. Then the white settlers arrived. "They came roaring down on horseback, shouting, the stagecoach coming full speed, the buckboards, the settlers in their old costumes, and they sang songs of windmills and cattle drives," said Pryor. For one song, "Punching Cows," even Johnson's Herefords got into the act as props with "cowboys across the river actually herding LBJ cattle." Savagery and civilization, in the form of theatre, met right there on the LBJ. In Cactus Pryor's view, these lavish productions were "*the* most successful entertainment that we've ever had at the ranch." The grandiose display gave many visitors a sense that it was all a window into the powerful character, rugged individualism, and moral building experience thought to characterize the old cattle

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<sup>250</sup> Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library, University of Texas Oral History Project, #AC 69-72, Interview with Richard S. "Cactus" Pryor (September 10, 1968): 8a-12, 20, 22; Dugger, *The Politician*, 144; *Newsweek* quoted in Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson. Volume 4: The Passage of Power* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2012): 510; Susan Black and Brendan Gill, "The Talk of the Town: Barbeque" [Abstract], *New Yorker* (August 29, 1964): 22.

For another description of VP LBJ's cowboy activities at the Ranch for 30 United Nations delegates see Marie Smith, "LBJ Ranch Set to Welcome the World," *The Washington Post* (April 27, 1963): C7.

drives. Almost every visitor who had seen a Western movie or bought into the national myths of the United States could understand the symbols being communicated at the LBJ Ranch. As Hal K. Rothman observed, “It was as if the world of the Western movie had come to life.” These outdoor theatrics, then, were not just entertainment but a vivid example of how the idea of the frontier, as the definition of American society and culture, had become deeply entrenched in national thought and in the President’s own mind. As for most of his foreign guests, their impressions of how Americans saw themselves and the world around them must now appear to have been confirmed.<sup>251</sup>



**Figure 4.3: A Texas “Fandangle” performed at the barbeque for Latin American Ambassadors, LBJ Ranch, April 1, 1967.** (Photo courtesy of the LBJ Library, #C4932-A8)

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<sup>251</sup> Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library, University of Texas Oral History Project, #AC 69-72, Interview with Richard S. “Cactus” Pryor (September 10, 1968): 22-25; Rothman, *LBJ’s Texas White House*, 167.

The LBJ Ranch “experience” demonstrates the power of social/cultural structures such as the Frontier Myth to accommodate a nation’s self-identity and almost everything that occurs in society. Americans and those familiar with the myths and ideas of the frontier west saw in the Ranch a cultural resonance that fit their preconceived notions of the “real America.” Not cities and industry but a rural “spread” that seemed to represent a simpler vision of a nation of working people who appreciated community and order; but the Ranch was also the place where many of LBJ’s “helping hand” progressive programs were conceived and promoted. An April 1961 visit from Chancellor Konrad Adenauer of West Germany, a nation fascinated with the fiction of Karl May and other Western writers, provided the first clear example of the Johnson locale being transformed from one of national iconography to international symbolic meaning. Here was a genuine American, Lyndon B. Johnson, in the genuine America. And here in Stonewall, Texas, was the tangible expression of a frontier experience that seemed to provide for an American past as impressive and spectacular as those of other nations which could trace their histories back much further in time.<sup>252</sup>

### **“Tall in the Saddle”**

During the early days of his presidency, when the Frontier Myth had reached a pinnacle of its influence, LBJ’s much-hyped cowboy skills and battles of man against beast also played well with most of the American public—only enhancing further the significance of his ranch while bolstering Johnson’s own frontier credentials. “He’s a

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<sup>252</sup> The Ranch as international meeting place was not without its limitations, though, as was the case when Field Marshal Mohammed Ayub Khan of Pakistan, a devout Muslim, arrived for a barbeque later that year and pork appeared on the menu (luckily for LBJ, Khan gently overlooked it as a mistake). During his “second presidency,” as America attempted to export its frontier vision abroad, more startling differences than mishaps on menus would soon challenge the frontier myth and its applicability abroad as well. Khan’s visit is described in Rothman, *LBJ’s Texas White House*, 103.



crack shot, a fine horseman, a no-nonsense angler, and he knows every blade of the hill country of Texas,” proclaimed *Argosy* magazine in its special October 1964 feature, “LBJ Outdoor Sportsman.” LBJ was described as an avid naturalist, “soil-loving rancher,” the “first real ‘outdoorsman’ since Teddy Roosevelt, the first since T.R. who can sit on a horse, rope a calf and handle a gun with the casual ease of a man who has lived much of his life out of doors.” After this big build-up, friends of Johnson’s were quoted as saying that “He’s a damned fine shot...real deliberate with a gun...the hardest hunter you ever saw....can navigate by the stars,” rides a horse “with the grace and bearing of a man born to the saddle” and has “an insatiable appetite about nature in general.” The friendly columnist for *Argosy* must have had his tongue in his cheek when he also wrote that LBJ was a talented fisherman but did not exploit his fishing prowess in front of the press “because he’s basically honest” and “has never encouraged this approach to his political image [!].” Johnson’s long-time staffer and Press Secretary George Reedy’s account of LBJ’s outdoorsman abilities were not quite as glowing. Reedy tells us that the ranch was close to Johnson because it gave him a sense of identity. But he also reveals that LBJ’s “self-painted portrait of a cattleman tending his herds...was difficult to accept with a straight face. He *did* know something about cattle but he ‘tended’ them from a Lincoln Continental with a chest full of ice and a case of scotch and soda in the back seat.” Reedy’s shot of reality aside, the plethora of good press for LBJ’s “rancher and outdoorsman” persona may have had much less substance to it than TR’s did but the puffed up Johnson-as-hunter-frontiersman imagery became fixed, striking a responsive chord with much of the American public in the early 1960s.<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> Bob Brister, “LBJ: Outdoor Sportsman,” *Argosy* (October 1964): 39-40, 86-88 in LBJ Library, Democratic National Committee Files, Series 1, Box 147, Magazine Articles; George Reedy, *Lyndon B. Johnson: A Memoir* (New York: Andrews and McMeel, 1982): 154.



**Figure 4.4:** The President celebrates his Presidential Election victory the previous day by demonstrating his cattle herding prowess for the press at the LBJ Ranch, November 4, 1964. (©Bettmann/CORBIS)

Through the LBJ Ranch and stories of the president's hunting, riding and shooting acumen, LBJ could personally and politically tap into part of the Teddy Roosevelt mystique and its vigorous, masculine elements of the Frontier Myth. LBJ, "Tall in the Saddle" as the *Washington Post* described him, was no longer viewed predominantly as a DC Beltway insider or a Southerner but as a Western frontiersman, a President who maintained a level of both personal and national vitality through his individual interactions with the frontier. So long as the Frontier Myth remained an explanation for the American experience and life ways (as depicted in LBJ's virtual frontier re-

enactments for willing press writers)—it served Lyndon Johnson extremely well. It was a Frontier persona so desirable at this time, in fact, that another major political figure would attempt to rope the White House away from LBJ by beating him at his own game. But the Frontier Myth of the early to mid-1960s was not able to accommodate this rival cowboy's ultra-conservative style and less inclusive brand of politics...at least not just yet.<sup>254</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> Winzola McLendon, "LBJ's Tall in the Saddle." *Washington Post*, July 20, 1964: B5.

## V.

### **Domestic “Showdowns for Progress” and Outer Space Frontiers**

Each of us, in our own way, is the product of a frontier, and the builder of a frontier in their time. America is the land of the perpetual frontier. We must carry with us the old virtues that we have needed on every frontier....but we must add a new indispensable: the ability to...give wings to our hopes. I have in mind for this country a Great Society.

—Johnson’s remarks at a “Salute to President Johnson” Dinner in Cleveland, 1964<sup>255</sup>

Although it wrestled with liberal and conservative symbolic elements, the Frontier Myth had re-established itself as *the* interpretive framework for American society in the late 1950s and early 1960s. At this stage it had both encompassed and was key to the Johnson Administration’s promotion of its ambitious “Great Society” programs. Frontier visions were symbolic of an optimistic and hopeful future that was inclusive of the Civil Rights movement, Medicare and Head Start education programs, aimed to ensure equality of opportunity, provided a rationale for the “New Conservation” greening initiatives, and inspired the pioneering of space exploration. The myth’s structure was emerging for LBJ as a given and the President’s programs slid right into place alongside popular western imagery of the day. But like accidental Cowboy

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<sup>255</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, “Remarks at a ‘Salute to President Johnson’ Dinner in Cleveland,” October 8, 1964, *Public Papers of the Presidents*, University of California at Santa Barbara’s (UCSB) American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=26579&st=Cleveland&st1=#axzz1fDCBHx1q> (November 30, 2011).

President TR, before seeing his initiatives fully through Johnson first required the kind of mandate that he could only obtain at the polling booth.

### **'64 Campaign Shootout**

Given the stature and influence of the Frontier Myth during this era, it was only fitting that 1964 would be the *only* US Presidential election campaign featuring two verifiable Cowboy candidates: President Lyndon Baines Johnson of the Texas Hill Country and Republican Senator Barry Goldwater of Phoenix, Arizona who would face each other in the final race. Both liberals and conservatives hoped to exploit the myth and its symbolism as representing their visions for the nation. But in the context of the events and myth structure of 1964, the liberal Democrat LBJ held the upper hand.

Barry Goldwater's constituency was made up for the most part of those Americans who were unhappy with liberalism and the state of the nation and who admired a style of action that seemed frozen in the nineteenth century. In terms of regions he appealed especially to white voters in the Deep South and conservative Southwesterners. Goldwater told Americans that "freedom today is dependent on government confinement" and actively opposed virtually every federal government policy initiative since the Hoover Administration. In the area of foreign policy, the Arizona Senator insisted that the nation needed to pursue a domino theory in reverse by promoting American democracy and values to topple communist regimes, belligerently calling upon his fellow Arizonans and countrymen to "declare the World Communist movement an outlaw in the community of civilized nations."<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> John C. Hammerback, "Barry Goldwater's Rhetoric of Rugged Individualism," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (April 1972): 178; *Ibid*, 179; *Ibid*, 179.

Of all the frontier values outlined by Turner and TR, rugged individualism was Goldwater's number one and most pervasive theme. The Republican presidential candidate lauded the "simple" wisdom of America's past with black and white solutions that de-emphasized international cooperation and believed that increased freedom and liberty could only be achieved in individuals, businesses and communities if they were allowed to manage their own affairs. As for his own persona, like LBJ, Goldwater claimed that his frontier family in Arizona personified bravery, self-reliance and the strenuous life. (Also, like his opponent, he left out some facts that did not appear to fit the stories: most notably that his parents, Baron and Jojo, got rich not only from hard work but through lucrative federal government contracts.) Goldwater told audiences of his family's frontier heritage in Arizona and attempted to fit into this mold on twentieth century terms by becoming an explorer, jet pilot, innovative businessman, and an outdoor photographer. Images taken of "AuH2O," sometimes by himself, typically showed him in frontier guises. In one well-publicized image by the renowned photographer, Yousuf Karsh, the Senator posed in a cowboy hat, buckskin jacket, and jeans with a rifle at the ready on a faux background of huge Sonoran Desert cacti (Figure 5.1). Karsh apparently understood the obvious contrast between myth and reality (perhaps better than did the candidate himself) as he chose to shoot Goldwater not defending helpless frontier folk but in front of a swimming pool surrounded by lawn chairs. Goldwater, Robert Goldberg has observed, was cast as a "legitimate son of the Old West."<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> Robert A. Goldberg, "The Western Hero in Politics: Barry Goldwater, Ronald Reagan, and the Rise of the American Conservative Movement," in Jeff Roche, ed., *The Political Culture of the New West* (Lawrence KS: University Press of Kansas, 2008): 29; *Ibid*, 21.



**Figure 5.1: Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, 1963. Photograph by Yousuf Karsh.** (Reproduced with permission. © Estate of Yousuf Karsh).

Through pursuing this frontier persona, Goldwater had effectively freed himself of the old negative portrayals of Republicans as stiff, country-club, starched collar types. Unfortunately for the GOP, the successes of his rugged individualist persona which helped lead to his nomination was not ultimately a good fit with the much more middle-of-the-road and liberal Frontier Myth of the 1950s and early 1960s and the majority of American voters who adhered to it. Barry Goldwater's own appeals to the "silent" Americans who went about their daily business without "demands for special treatment"—his "Platform for the Forgotten America"—seemed to many moderates as

seriously compromised by his simultaneous strategy to woo white voters from the South with his opposition to the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Goldwater also did not help himself at the Republican National Convention when he grimly declared that “Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice.” And, once out on the campaign trail, his speeches seemed to lose their frontier foundations and came to more closely resemble, as Goldberg has put it, “Old Testament jeremiads.” LBJ’s campaign staff immediately recognized Goldwater’s cranky and out of touch, frontier persona and saddled up.<sup>258</sup>

The Democratic Campaign worked overtime to portray LBJ as a responsible liberal cowpoke while dusting up his opponent, the reactionary Senator Goldwater, as a bad man and crazy cowboy with his itchy finger on the nuclear trigger. One Democratic Party tract insisted: “Goldwater wants a ‘Showdown’—a duel between nuclear nations, and his own statements prove this beyond a shadow of a doubt.” The Republican candidate himself only fed into this kooky-cowboy image when he wrote, “In the Old West, the six-gun was called the equalizer; it made all men the same height and the same strength. The atom bomb and its offspring, the nuclear bomb, have become the six-guns of today’s world.”<sup>259</sup>

By early September, Special Assistant to the President Jack Valenti had advised Johnson by confidential Memorandum on the course the presidential campaign should

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<sup>258</sup> Former President Dwight Eisenhower was among those “confused” by Barry Goldwater’s comment that “Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice...” and told the Republican candidate directly that he “could not actively support the Republican ticket unless the Senator satisfactorily clarified himself.” Roscoe Drummond, “Extremism: GOP Embattled,” *Christian Science Monitor* (July 27, 1964) clipping in LBJ Library, Democratic National Committee Files, Series 1, Box 173, LBJ—Activities Prior to the Convention: Campaign Strategy After Republican Convention at which Senator Goldwater Nominated file; Goldberg, “The Western Hero in Politics,” 30.

<sup>259</sup> Characterization of Goldwater and quote from his book *Why Not Victory?* (4<sup>th</sup> Ed., August 1964) found in: LBJ Library, Democratic National Committee Collection, Series 1, Box 20, “Correction Please!: Special Edition,” (October 14, 1964): 1,6. The Harris Survey reported on August 10, 1964 (in a poll read by LBJ) that “a majority of the public was fearful Senator Goldwater as President might go too far and plunge the country into a nuclear war.” See LBJ Library, Public Relations 16 Collection, Box 345, 5/20/64 to 8/31/64, The Harris Survey by Louis Harris: 4.



take. Valenti was blunt and animated, contending that “we ought to treat Goldwater not as an equal, who has credentials to be President, but as a radical, a preposterous candidate who would ruin our country and its future.” Valenti continued: “We ought to get some gag writers to destroy Goldwater....We must make him ridiculous...trigger-happy, a bomb thrower.” Fellow-Special Assistant Lawrence O’Brien echoed Valenti’s advice when he wrote to LBJ “The Bomb is the biggest issue by far. Voters are frightened of Goldwater and don’t want him in the same room as the nuclear trigger.” Apparently LBJ agreed. Over the final months of the campaign, Goldwater was consistently portrayed by Democratic campaigners as a crazy, kook-right, nuclear gunslinger who was grossly irresponsible, anti-peace, anti-Social Security, anti-Medicare, and anti-government. President Johnson himself delivered essentially the same message about his opponent but with a few LBJ enhancements borrowing heavily from the conventional wisdom of America’s frontier experience.<sup>260</sup>

In a speech given in Reno, Johnson employed in his own “high road” style of frontier imagery—emphasizing the needs of the frontier community and role of the Federal Government—to drive at what had now become the key message of his campaign, “responsibility”:

Here on the frontier of the West, the watchword has always been freedom....We know how the West was won. It wasn’t won by men on horses who tried to settle every argument with a quick draw and a shot from the hip. We here in the West aren’t about to turn in our sterling silver American heritage for a plastic credit card that reads, “Shoot now; pay later”.... We didn’t build this Nation by everyone scratching and clawing for himself. We built it, like we built the West, by pitching in together and by always acting responsibly.... ‘We the people’ are going to

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<sup>260</sup> LBJ Library, Public Relations 16 Collection, Box 345, 9/1/64 to 9/30/64, “JV Memo on the Campaign” from Jack Valenti to President Johnson, September 7, 1964; *Ibid*, 10/1/64 to 10/28/64 “Memorandum to the President Re: Weekend Summary of Regional Organizational Meetings,” from Lawrence F. O’Brien to President Johnson, October 4, 1964: 5-6.

stay in business and ‘we, the Government’ are going to do together the things that we can’t do alone. One candidate is roaming around the country saying what a terrible thing the Government is....Somebody better tell him that most Americans are not ready to trade the American eagle in for a plucked banty rooster. He better know that most people just don’t believe the United States Government is a foreign power or an enemy.

For LBJ, working together “responsibly” in an optimistic, community minded milieu, with a little help from the Federal Government, would enable Americans to help preserve world peace and do more than they could do alone, bringing more personal freedom for the individual. The ’64 Democratic Platform spoke of ending discrimination on the basis of race, age, sex or national origin so that Americans not only had the “right to be free” but also would have “the ability to use their freedom.” Under the Bill of Rights Johnson contended that Americans had more personal freedom in 1964 than they had ever had before in the nation’s, or world’s, history but that more needed to be done to reach the ultimate goal of equal opportunity and equal treatment for all Americans.<sup>261</sup> In making these statements, LBJ (and the Democratic Party platform) was tapping directly into a liberal, national Frontier Myth so deeply entrenched in American thinking that it did not need specific explanation. Here was more than a party platform, it was a national vision for the future—based on a legendary past—that was impervious to regionalism and its peculiar characteristics of segregation, unequal access to education and even economic disparity.

In his remarks to the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, the chairman of the Platform Committee, Carl Albert, employed this same forward-looking

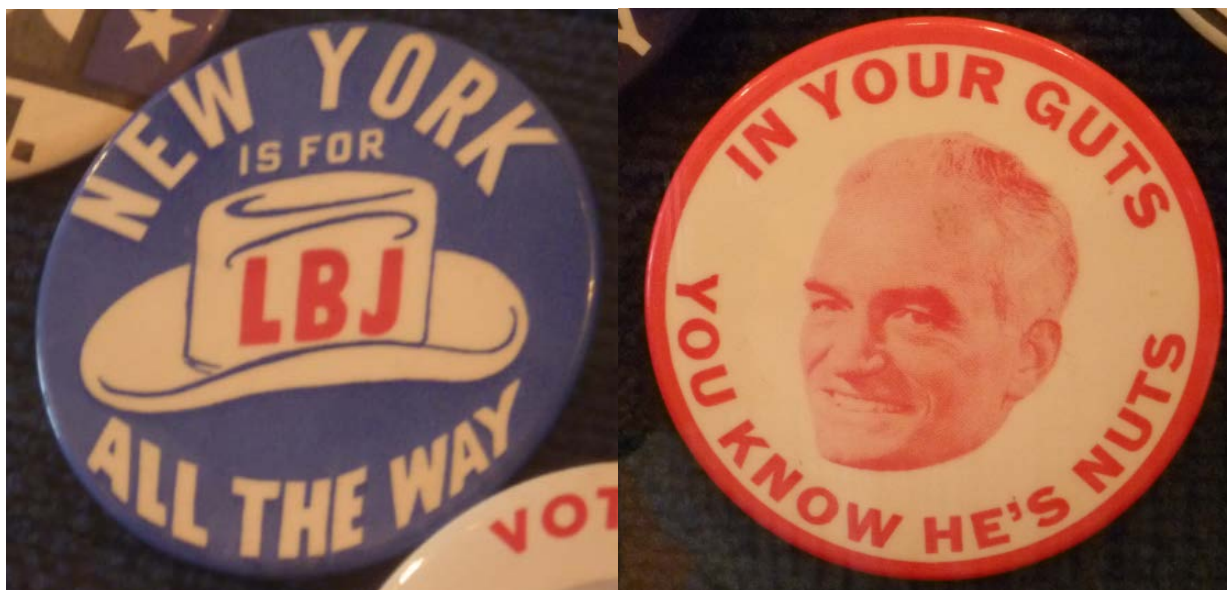
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<sup>261</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, *Papers of the Presidents, 1963-1964*, “Remarks at the State Building in Reno,” October 12, 1964, 1307-1308; *One Nation, One People: Democratic Platform, 1964*: 16. Johnson’s personal copy in the LBJ Library, Democratic National Committee Files, Series 1, Box 173, President Johnson: Democratic National Convention Platform ’64—File.

version of the Frontier Myth when he declared: “This is a progressive platform. This is a platform that profits from the past, but looks to the future. This is a Lyndon Johnson platform.” The optimistic future promised by LBJ versus the pessimistic past of Goldwater also appeared as a frame in the ’64 Democratic Party campaign literature. One pamphlet, “Why Rural America Needs Johnson–Humphrey,” told readers that if Goldwater were elected, the US would be turning the clock back to America’s rural past: “And those who recall the past with its back-breaking labor, its inconvenience, its insecurity and its poverty of hope do not want this.” Happily, “man of the soil” LBJ would “continue to give the farmer his rightful place and rightful share in American society.” Throughout the race, Goldwater’s own words were used against him repeatedly and with great effectiveness to make the Arizonan appear as a callous dunce who voted against rural school lunch programs and uttered such statements as: “I’m not a farmer, and I don’t know anything about farming”....“I would get rid of the Agriculture Act”....and “I fear Washington and centralized government more than I do Moscow.”<sup>262</sup> Goldwater had failed to recognize the power of the mid-twentieth century Frontier Myth as a great equalizer: with a little help from the Federal Government, the frontier through ranching and farming had given even impoverished folk the opportunity to pursue the American Dream of “making it” through hard work and a spirit of community and optimism for a brighter future.

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<sup>262</sup> LBJ Library, Democratic National Committee Files, Series 1, Box 173, President Johnson, Convention Platform file, Press Release “Remarks by Rep. Carl Albert on the Platform,” August 25, 1964: 1; LBJ Library, Democratic National Committee Files, Series 1, Box 175, President Johnson, Campaign ’64: Official Campaign Slogans, Songs, Materials, Etc. file, “Why Rural America Needs Johnson–Humphrey” pamphlet.



**Figure 5.2: Johnson's '64 Presidential Campaign at full gallop with campaign buttons declaring Easterners from TR's home state for the "reasonable" and forward-thinking cowboy, LBJ, versus his "trigger-happy," "backward" and regionalist opponent, Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater.** (Images taken by the author at the LBJ Museum, Austin TX, 2011)

A plethora of evidence indicates that Johnson took *every* opportunity to be seen as an "American cowboy" and ranch man as he stole the thunder away from Goldwater's own rugged persona by riding his horses and rounding up cattle for the press, and donning his Stetson and shiny boots. So constant were his cowboy antics that LBJ's conscious efforts appear to have been bordering on obsessive. Both Johnson and Goldwater disliked the media, but unlike his opponent, LBJ appears to have much better understood its power to persuade (and his own power, at this point, to persuade the press) as he launched the far more effective "Cowboy" campaign. He even received help from some little cowhands. According to the *Washington Post*, "to children, the greatest Western hero since Hopalong Cassidy is President Lyndon B. Johnson." Describing a new, pre-election book by Bill Adler, *Letters to the President*, the *Post* reported that half of 2,500 letters that Johnson received from children each week referred to his Western

persona or his ranch. “To the kids,” Adler proclaimed, “he’s a cowboy.”<sup>263</sup> The shrewd and calculating Johnson, who had cut his teeth during the New Deal era of the 1930’s and now wanted to “out-[FD] Roosevelt Roosevelt,” also knew how to out-cowboy Goldwater by using his Frontier-President image to full advantage.

Barry Goldwater, meanwhile, did not do himself any favours. He failed to live up to the mid-1960s interpretation of the Frontier Myth by appearing less and less as a confident and optimistic Western hero and more and more as a backward and unstable, conservative extremist who was out of touch with the times. To make matters worse for the Republicans, he did not seem to represent the entire nation, but rather, specific constituencies of ultra-conservatives, Deep South white Democrats, and localized supporters in his home state of Arizona. The structure of the Frontier Myth at that point in time was quintessentially national in nature, inclusive, and appeared to offer a way forward for *all* Americans except Goldwater supporters and the Republicans of his day who backed his campaign did not “get” this and, as a result, failed to deploy those elements of the myth that had been taken as a given. Goldwater’s campaign could not convince most of the public that he represented them, all regions of the country, or the public’s mostly optimistic visions for America’s future.

By contrast, for the rhetorical LBJ on the campaign trail in 1964, it was the people of the frontier that had brought faith and light to the entire nation. He told a breakfast audience in Portland, Oregon that he had flown across a continent to see them in just a few hours: “A continent it took decades of daring to conquer. It took brave men and strong men to make that crossing. But, most of all it took men of faith—men of great faith in themselves, in their country, in the future of this land.” The President continued:

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<sup>263</sup> McLendon, “LBJ’s Tall in the Saddle...,” B5.

“The West is not just a place. It is an idea. The Bible says, ‘Speak to the earth and it shall teach thee.’ And here, in the West, we learned man’s possibilities were as spacious as the sky that covered him. We learned that free men could build a civilization as majestic as the mountains and the rivers that nourished him. We learned that with our hands we could create a life that was worthy of the land that was ours. And that lesson,” Johnson proclaimed,” has illuminated the life of all America—east, west, north and south.”<sup>264</sup> Johnson’s own rhetoric, in keeping with the nationalistic Frontier Myth and popular vision that the Old West encompassed all of the best that America had to offer, ignored the fact that much of the process he described also involved heavy-handed colonialism toward Native Americans, a grasping imperialist war with Mexico, and encompassed a number of nineteenth century ideas of assimilation, progress, and faith in social evolution. But what mattered most to LBJ and his throngs of supporters was that America’s mythic past was still relevant to the world, provided that it was national in scope and was being projected forward into the future. Furthermore, as Gerald Nash has asserted in *The American West in the Twentieth Century*, it was the postwar West that had become the trendsetter for the nation on issues ranging from race relations and immigration to the environment to technological innovation.<sup>265</sup> In the context of mid-1960s America and its faith in the liberal Frontier Myth, it was LBJ’s message of positive, progressive, forward-looking change and not Goldwater’s reactionary vision which, initially, rang true for most Americans voters.

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<sup>264</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, Presidential Papers, “Remarks on Conservation at a Breakfast in Portland Saluting the Northwest – Southwest Power Transmission Intertie,” September 17, 1964, *American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=26507> (December 23, 2011).

<sup>265</sup> Gerald D. Nash, *The American West in the Twentieth Century: A Short History of an Urban Oasis* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice Hall, 1973): 6.

On November 3, 1964, Lyndon Johnson was elected to his first full term as President by winning the largest percentage of the popular vote in US history. While his Republican opponent in the campaign was a westerner who had attempted to assume political stances credited to the character of the American frontier, LBJ cleaned Goldwater's plough and swept every state in the West except Arizona (Barry Goldwater captured his own state with a margin of only 0.5% of the vote).<sup>266</sup>

### **A "Great Society" Mandate & the Frontier Myth as Symbol for the Future**

Johnson now had a mandate for his ambitious liberal programs. The structure of the Frontier Myth as a unifying national myth capable of explaining and answering America's questions—essentially the same message deployed by LBJ—had dislodged the competing campaign of Goldwater and set up the ushering in of the most extensive program of liberal legislation since the New Deal. "The Great Society," Johnson told the nation, "rests upon abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time." In keeping with the myth, LBJ was a kind of liberal nationalist, who perceived a broad consensus for a strong defense against external threats and for domestic programs that eased the problems that emerged with an advanced industrial society and reduced poverty and racism. Put simply, he was following the conventional "frontier wisdom" of his times which thought that government should be about improving the lives of its citizens. Johnson reaped the benefits of the myth with powerful public support. In January 1965, Gallup polls showed that 71 percent of the American public approved of LBJ's

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<sup>266</sup> Ross R. Rice, "The 1964 Elections in the West," *Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (June 1965): 433.



performance as President with a disapproval rate of just 15 percent: impressive figures in any era for a President already serving in his second year in office.<sup>267</sup>



**Figure 5.3: “Where Seldom is Heard a Discouraging Word.”** Charles Brooks, *The Birmingham News*, January 20, 1965. (Reproduced with permission of Barbara Brooks Bankhead and Charles Brooks, Jr.)<sup>268</sup>

<sup>267</sup> Johnson quoted in William E. Leuchtenburg, *A Troubled Feast: American Society Since 1945* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1983): 138; George H. Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1935-1971, Vol. 3, 1959-1971* (New York: Random House, 1972): 1222.

<sup>268</sup> Charles Brooks cartoon in Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Special Files: Cartoon Collections, Box 1, File 1, Political Issues 1956-1964.



In the Foreword to the 1965 edition of Walter Prescott Webb's *The Texas Rangers*, President Johnson (or at least his White House speech writers) presented what might have come closest to his own vision of the Frontier Myth and what it meant for the nation and his Administration's policies:

The American Frontier cannot properly be described in the past tense. The influence of the Frontier has been great upon our political institutions, our social patterns, our values and aspirations as a people, and, especially, upon the democratic character of our society. The influence of the Frontier as a molding force in our system is far from spent....

'The West' is not so much a geographic place as it is a symbol—a symbol of America's confidence that on beyond the moment, on beyond the present terrain, the world will be brighter, the future better....

As we become a more populous and far more urbanized nation, an instinct develops—a right and just instinct—to preserve the heritage of the open country, the clear skies, clean streams. More importantly another instinct develops—an instinct to preserve the equality of opportunity, the dignity of the individual, the commitment to justice for all that derive from the spirit of the Frontier era. Our affluence, our abundance, our strength and power have not dulled the values experience taught us through the challenge of opening the Frontier....

In the challenging and perilous times of this century, free men everywhere might consider the motto [of Texas Ranger Captain L.H. McNelly] that 'courage is a man who keeps coming on'....

We cannot be sure that in our own time we will reach and fulfill the goals of our society or the ideals on which our system stands. But we can, by dedication and commitment, be the kind of people who 'keep on coming on.'<sup>269</sup>

By recalling part of America's history and quoting the nation's heroes, presidents and politicians in general connect themselves with America's past, with its mission, values

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<sup>269</sup> LBJ quoted in Foreword to Walter Prescott Webb, *The Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense* (Austin: University of Texas, 1965): ix-xi.

and goals. As LBJ characterized the nation in flattering Western terms he was redefining his readers or audience as the kind of folks who have always supported the excellent ideas like those in his programs. The influence of the frontier, Johnson insists, will *continue* to sustain and shape the Federal government and the nation's values and democratic character. The West remains a symbol for a better and brighter future and the "spirit of the frontier" an ongoing force for shaping Americans commitment to equality of opportunity, justice, and the dignity of individuals (distinct from emphasizing individualism in and of itself). Most of all, Americans must "keep coming on" not to preserve what was, but to meet modern challenges and work toward reaching goals and ideals of American society which have not yet been met.

In moving toward these goals and ideals, LBJ tied his Western credentials and "lessons" from America's pioneering days to his own administration and his rationales in 1964-66 for engineering the passage of more liberal, domestic legislation in a two year period than any U.S. President. According to the Johnsonian view, then, the values of the Frontier Myth were not a symbol of better times past, but of preparing for better times ahead. This optimism for the future described by Ray Allen Billington as the myth's most "outstanding feature" was already the accepted view of most Americans of the early 1960s who supported LBJ's policies and voted him back into office.

In the film currently shown at the LBJ Museum, *Lyndon Baines Johnson: 36<sup>th</sup>* President, this same message continues to be directed at viewers. The narrator describes the opening, serene shot of Johnson Country but then sets the tone for the 'pioneering' section of the film by adding, "The gentle beauty of springtime in the Hill Country of Central Texas offered little warning of the harsh life awaiting early settlers." Johnson's Western background and persona here and in his written accounts are depicted as

having helped to define and promote the Great Society programs—which look to make life better for Americans than the tough existence of the past. Joseph Califano was later in awe of his former boss’ ambitions for the nation: “There was no child he could not feed, no adult he could not put to work, no disease he could not cure.” For Califano, LBJ’s forward-looking and optimistic domestic program was his gift to the nation. As this dissertation also contends it was a view derived from the nation’s culture and value system—as defined by the myth—which promoted optimism, opportunity and inclusiveness and meant driving forward with the kind of boldness and innovation that pioneering Americans so the story told, had exhibited the century before.<sup>270</sup>

### **“We *Shall* Overcome”: Community, Civil Rights and Inclusiveness**

The Frontier structure had gained its most influential adherent of the 1960s in Lyndon Baines Johnson. In the pronouncements of the President, the environment had forced old customs to conform to new realities and so it would be for American society of the late twentieth Century. And like any good master explanation for American development, LBJ’s touchstone seemed to account for past and future.

As implied in his Foreword to *The Texas Rangers*, for Johnson, meeting the challenges of future frontiers also meant promoting an agenda of cooperation, community, a democratic spirit, equal opportunity, tolerance, civil rights and immigration: the more inclusive shades of the Frontier Myth. At a fundraising dinner in New Orleans, he told his audience that: “The years have been long. The trials have been many. The burdens have been great. But the times are beginning to respond to

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<sup>270</sup> Transcription to “Lyndon Baines Johnson: 36<sup>th</sup> President.” Film shown to visitors to the LBJ Library and Museum, Austin TX in October 2011; Joseph Califano, Jr., *The Triumph and Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson: The White House Years* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991): 11, 338-339, 151-152.

America's steadfast purpose....The platform which I stand says: "The Federal Government exists not to grow larger, but to enlarge the individual potential and achievement of the people." And "we are not going to lose [our vision of] tomorrow in divisions over things of the past." Breaking from his prepared text, LBJ then went for the jugular of the southern segregationists' right on their home turf, asserting: "Equal opportunity for all, special privileges for none"....this "is no time to preach division or hate. If there was ever a time for us to try to unite and find areas of agreement, it is now." The President added, "It is time for us to have a little trust and a little faith in each other, and to try to find some areas that we can agree on so we can have a united program....and do what is right."<sup>271</sup> No President addressing a Deep Southern crowd in person had ever spoken in such terms.

LBJ also told audiences at speaking engagements and in televised addresses that the "purpose of democracy is fulfillment for every individual." The abundance of opportunity, meanwhile, was to his mind what made the United States exceptional from other countries. Relatedly the term "Frontier" continued to mean a place to be discovered and a place of opportunity. Today, LBJ liked to say, "Something is happening which is as exciting—even more exciting—than the winning of the West." Then he would go on to describe one of his Great Society programs such as Federal Medicare or aid to education, or laws guaranteeing the equality of its citizens. The President would usually remind his listeners that those afraid to take this *new* pioneering journey or who claimed it was "too expensive" would not be dealt with kindly in the history books. Like the early settlers who "built a new world out of the wilderness," Americans had to stay

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<sup>271</sup> Lyndon Baines Johnson, "Remarks at a Fundraising Dinner in New Orleans," October 9, 1964, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. UCSB American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid-26585> (accessed October 11, 2011).

the course. LBJ likened his wide-ranging liberal programs to a new “great age of exploration” that would prove even more glorious an accomplishment than that of Americans’ ancestors in the previous century. But to reach the Promised Land Americans would need to come along on the journey with him.<sup>272</sup>

In what was perhaps LBJ’s most lauded message to Congress on March 15, 1965 he came out strongly in support of voting rights for African-Americans, he told the American public: “There is no Negro problem. There is no Southern problem. There is no Northern problem. There is only an American problem. And we are met here tonight as Americans—not as Democrats or Republicans—we are met here as Americans to solve that problem....”<sup>273</sup> Johnson was determined to achieve a solid and sweeping *national* civil rights bill and to defeat the “enemies” of America’s past: racism, poverty, ignorance and disease. Driven by his dream of ending the Civil War for good, his belief in a national, not a regional vision, and inclinations about the equality of men, Johnson went for broke—quoting directly from a key anthem of the American Civil Rights Movement: “We Shall Overcome.” The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 were the most outstanding accomplishments of his career, and Johnson owed much of his success to the mobilization of the frontier myth. Along the way, Lyndon Johnson frequently peppered his speeches with stories of Western heroism in urging “all-American” equal rights—and not just those featuring Anglo-Saxon types. On several occasions, he read from the roster of the battle of the Alamo, “the Lexington and Concord west of the Mississippi,” where the name of a black man who died there was

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<sup>272</sup> One speech which contained virtually *all* of these elements is Lyndon B. Johnson, Public Papers of the President, 1967, “Remarks at the Dedication of Central Texas College, Killeen, Texas,” December 12, 1967, 1117-1121.

<sup>273</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, Public Papers of the Presidents, 1965, “Special Message to Congress: The American Promise,” Item 107, March 15, 1965: 282-284.

read out alongside those who were at least part Irish, German and Spanish.<sup>274</sup> Through such stories, Johnson achieved another presidential first, acknowledging and promoting the heroic role of minorities in the popularly perceived “Winning of the West.” LBJ’s reforms and programs—buoyed by the “spirit of the frontier” and its demands for equality on a national scale in his own mind and in the minds of millions of Americans in all regions—were sweeping.

## **Gun Control**

As Brian Dippie, Rush Welter and other cultural historians have argued, the power of myth to not only explain but to shape events and policies is key to our understanding of America’s past. Lyndon Johnson not only emphasized his own connections to the frontier experience and common folk, along with “real life heroes” to promote his ambitious programs and social reforms, he garnered support from Hollywood Western movie, TV and radio stars “to get the word out.” In one example from the final year of the Johnson presidency, Charlton Heston, Jimmy Stewart, Gregory Peck, Kirk Douglas, and Hugh O’Brian (star of TV’s long-running *Wyatt Earp: Frontier Marshal*) all actively worked with the Johnson Administration in passing the 1968 Gun Control Act. White House Special Counsel Larry Levinson sent a memo on June 12, 1968 to a speech writer stating: “At the President’s suggestion, Jack Valenti has agreed to hold a luncheon in Los Angeles...June 17, at which a number of famous movie actors—particularly those who played cowboys—will speak out in favor of the President’s gun legislation....we need

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<sup>274</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson: “Special Message to the Congress: The American Promise,” March 15, 1965. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=26805> (accessed 23 February 2016); Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President 1964* (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1965): 376; Hugh Sidey, “Deep Grow the Roots of the Alamo,” *Life* (May 31, 1968): 32B.

two pithy, one-page statements which will be read by two of the cowboys (probably Charlton Heston...), supporting the President's Gun Control Bill." A few days later the "cowboys" read the same prepared statement to a nationwide TV audience on the *Joey Bishop Show* and, in a letter to Special Assistant Joseph Califano, PR man Dick McKay wrote that "Charlton, Gregory and Hugh personally planted this statement with the bureau chiefs at AP and UPI." The considerable publicity generated by these celluloid lawmen in the waning days of the myth's influence helped the President secure passage of the bill.<sup>275</sup>

### **The "New Conservation"**

Reminiscent of TR and prior to the redirection of his energies toward American involvement in Vietnam, LBJ threw the full force of his tremendous energy into the preservation and protection of public lands. In perhaps his most quoted statement on the issue leading up to the 1964 Election, Johnson said: "We have always prided ourselves on not only being America the strong, America the free, but America the beautiful. Today that beauty is in danger. The water we drink, the food we eat, the very air we breathe, are threatened with pollution. Our parks are overcrowded. Our seashores overburdened. Green fields and dense forests are disappearing." In early February 1965 he called for a "New Conservation," a program which resulted in the creation of twelve task forces to address environment problems and ultimately the signing into law almost 300 conservation and beautification measures (more than any other president) at a cost

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<sup>275</sup> LBJ Library, Reference File, Gun Control, Correspondence from Larry Levinson to Charles Maguire, June 12, 1968; Correspondence from Joe Califano to Dick McKay, June 20, 1968 in *Ibid*; Correspondence from Dick McKay to Joe Califano, June 18, 1968 in *Ibid*. Also see Memorandum to President Johnson from Larry Levinson, June 18, 1968 in *Ibid*. The original documents are found in the LBJ Library, White House Central Files, SP, LE, Boxes 5 and 80.

of over \$12 billion. By 1966, LBJ boasted that for the first time the United States was saving more land than it was losing to development. And during his five year presidency, recreation tripled on public lands.<sup>276</sup>

Johnson's New Conservation program called for a national effort and echoed many of the rejuvenating rationales for preserving the wilderness that were claimed in Theodore Roosevelt's day. In *The Honolulu Advertiser* the editor responded to the new program by describing at length how LBJ and Udall were the "spiritual descendants" of Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot, and that it was in this context that Johnson's conservation message should best be viewed. Even TR's and LBJ's language, the *Advertiser* insisted, were similar. Both called for a coordinated, many-fronted effort to rescue the "beauty and quality of the continent we have conquered—perhaps over-conquered."<sup>277</sup>

But LBJ's Administration went beyond the conservation philosophy of TR's day by emphasizing those mid-twentieth century aspects of the Frontier Myth that highlighted the need of the community, both rural and urban, to meet their obligations to future generations. LBJ explained that this modern, forward-thinking conservation needed to go further than the "classic conservation" of the past, encompassing not only the countryside but cities and our man-made environment as well. Once again, LBJ appealed to the nation's conscience and suggests that only by meeting and *expanding* on past ideals can the needs and goals for the future be met. "For centuries, Americans

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<sup>276</sup> LBJ speech of May 22, 1964 quoted in LBJ Library, Democratic National Committee Files, Series 1, Box 175, President Johnson. Campaign '64: Official Campaign Slogans, Songs, Materials, Etc. file, "America...the Beautiful. Let's Keep It That Way" pamphlet; Melody Webb, "Lyndon Johnson: The Last Frontier President," *Journal of the West*, Vol. 34, Issue 2 (April 1995): 76.

<sup>277</sup> "Conservation Comes of Age," *Honolulu Advertiser* (February 10, 1965): A-18 in the LBJ Library, Democratic National Committee Collection, Series 1, Box 188, File—President Lyndon Johnson, Natural Beauty Message, February 9, 1965, Editorial and Columnist's Reaction.



have drawn strength and inspiration from the beauty of our country.” This generation, LBJ insisted, needed to live up to its historical and national responsibility to “preserve and extend such a heritage for its descendants.”<sup>278</sup> Traditionally, conservation had been a means of increasing the power of the federal government; as a result, the issues of economic growth versus natural scenery, private versus public rights, and states’ versus federal rights were always at the heart of the debates over the history of the program. The momentum of the Johnson presidency on the “new conservation” would still carry some weight during the Nixon, Ford and Carter years. As we shall see, though, conservation initiatives would face serious opposition during the Reagan presidency—after a tumultuous series of events caused the Frontier Myth to shift sharply to the right.

### **The Final Frontier**

Following the Soviet Union’s launch of Sputnik in 1957, Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson exploited the sluggish response of the Eisenhower Administration and became the nation’s leading political spokesman on Outer Space for more than a decade—delivering 40 speeches on the subject between 1957 and 1962 alone. The Soviets had aroused some of Americans deepest fears and anxieties during the postwar era. As the Reverend Billy Graham told Americans at an evangelical rally in 1953: “Almost all ministers of the gospel and students of the Bible agree that it [Communism] is master-minded by Satan himself.” The success of Sputnik only intensified Americans’ desire to rise to the challenge of the westering mission to spread frontier values and counter those of the “Red Menace” (the very antithesis of Americanism). In the minds of

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<sup>278</sup> “Text of the White House Message on Guarding U.S. Beauty,” *Washington Post* (February 9, 1965): A8+ in LBJ Library, Democratic National Committee Files, Series 1, Box 188, File—President Lyndon Johnson: Message to Congress on Natural Beauty, February 9, 1965. Conservation, Water and Air Pollution, Recreation, Highway Beautification, etc.

many Americans who had lived through the first two decades of the Cold War, the political, cultural and spiritual canyon separating the experience of the American Frontier from the Soviet East stretched as far as the imagination could reach.<sup>279</sup>

Not surprisingly then, many of LBJ's own pronouncements combined anti-Soviet imagery with frontier themes. Senator Johnson expressed his deep concern that in allowing Russia to get ahead of the USA in space, his own nation had faltered in "an American specialty from the beginning—pioneering." Tapping into Americans deepest fears about their hated enemy and the future, Johnson proclaimed in 1958 that "Outer space will be explored. It will become the domain of free men or of men whose minds are enslaved. Either we meet our responsibilities or abdicate to the totalitarianism the dimension which will shape the lives of the coming generations." Less than four years later, Vice President Johnson had some good news for the American public when he announced that returning astronaut John Glenn had "ridden a covered wagon across the frontier of space" after successfully orbiting the Earth. The following year, in 1963, when asked by a member of the press if it was worth spending enormous amounts of money required to fund the Apollo missions, Johnson described the ominous alternative: "The question is which kind of philosophy, democratic or Communist, will dominate outer space? I for one don't want to go to bed by the light of a Communist moon." Rather, Johnson intended to rope in the man on the moon himself. On one of his visits to the ranch the director of the Marshall Space Flight Center in Alabama, Dr. Wernher von

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<sup>279</sup> Reverend Billy Graham quoted in Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996): 81; Sputnik discussed in Robert A. Caro, *Master of the Senate*, 1024; the counterpoising of alleged frontier/Western values with those of the Soviets is discussed in David A. Smith, "American Nightmare: Images of Brainwashing, Thought Control, and Terror in Soviet Russia," *Journal of American Culture*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (September 2010): 227.

Braun, was handed a Stetson by President LBJ and told “to put it on the moon by 1970.”<sup>280</sup>

During the troubled second half of Johnson’s presidency, when the TV show *Star Trek* challenged viewers each week to imagine future visits to “Space: the final frontier,” LBJ persisted with his wagon-train-to-the-stars speech-making. The *Star Trek* series explained repeatedly how human society had evolved from its past of warfare, ecological destruction and racism and into a better future society of tolerance, self-determination and peace under the United Federation of Planets. Its creator, Gene Rodenberry, had been head writer for the Fifties TV-Western, *Have Gun Will Travel*, before he sold NBC Network executives the rights to a kind of “wagon train to the stars.”<sup>281</sup> Johnson described his hopes for the future in similar terms—provided that Americans, like the crew of the Starship Enterprise, would be willing, in effect, “to boldly go where no man has gone before.” Referring to Sputnik ten years after its launch, LBJ reflected that Americans were comparatively “backward because we did not choose adventure. We did not choose to have vision. We did not choose to look forward.” Competing demands of the Vietnam War and War on Poverty would compel Johnson to remind listeners that America had made tremendous strides during the 1960s and that “the great pilgrimage of man—like all adventures—costs money....We will not abandon our dream. We will never evacuate the frontiers of space to any other nation. We just must be the space pioneers who lead the way to the stars.” Americans, as Johnson had been saying for

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<sup>280</sup> Johnson’s activities and an overview of his early speeches related to Outer Space are described in the LBJ Library, Reference Collection, Space Activities (LBJ’s) file, “Record of the Vice President on Space Activities During 1957-1962,” (no author), 1962; Ronnie Dugger, *The Politician*, 143; LBJ statements spanning 1957 to 1963 all appear in the LBJ Presidential Library, Office Files of White House Aids, Box 29, George Reedy, “Statements of LBJ on Space Exploration,” Prepared by the NASA Historical Staff, Washington DC (no date); Ronnie Dugger, *The Politician*, 145.

<sup>281</sup> Carl Abbot, *Frontiers Past and Future*, 23.

years, were the world's greatest pioneers—and in each instance of the experience, from New England to California and now beyond into space, “the single greatest effect has been upon our political institutions and political concepts.” Here LBJ, as in his introduction to *The Texas Rangers*, is in tune with Frederick Jackson Turner on the frontier's greatest benefit—the democratic spirit. In a commentary which seemed to combine the ideas of Turner and *Star Trek* creator Gene Roddenberry, Johnson added that “As we found our national character in the frontiers of the American West, so, I believe, we can recapture our confidence and fulfill our greatness in the frontiers of the universe and beyond the atmosphere....We are moving to extend the frontiers of freedom—personal freedom, social freedom, economic freedom, and the freedom from the liberation of war.” These themes appeared again in a special message to Congress, this time with Johnson quoting directly from the Turner thesis itself:

*‘Behind institutions, behind constitutional forms and modifications, lie the vital forces that call these organs into life and shape them to meet changing conditions. The peculiarity of American institutions is the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people....’*

This represents a valid exposition of the vitality of our democratic process as it has endured for almost two hundred years.

For the President, America remained an exceptional nation and the most democratic society on earth due to its frontiering experience—adapting and changing as its people moved outward first across the frontier West, then out to the Pacific, and now into outer space, all the while adapting to change and becoming freer, fairer, more inclusive and more democratic. For FJT and LBJ, political democracy was central to American

distinctiveness and it was the frontiering experience that, more than anything else, fostered democracy. But for Johnson, it seemed, America's frontiers were limitless.<sup>282</sup>

Donald F. Hornig, Johnson's Director of the Office of Science and Technology, apparently bought into this philosophy as well when he praised his boss' efforts in broader terms of the American character that was and continued to be formed: "This country has thrived on a spirit of adventure...of the frontier [which] is still an important ingredient of what I consider the American national character. I think that space...has been one of the most important embodiments, and this President has had a lot to do with that, with the 1960's expression of it."<sup>283</sup>

Again and again, Lyndon Johnson's policy focus was consistently on the future, not the past. Repeatedly, Johnson claimed that technological innovation (especially as it related to the space program) was what would preserve American lives and freedoms. "American soul and American genius is big enough to conquer all obstacles," he would say, "and this is what we shall and must do." Johnson, then, possessed a similar "optimistic" mindset that his contemporary, New Turnerian Ray Allen Billington, had identified as "the outstanding feature of the frontier thesis." In accordance with the Frontier Myth, "can-do" Americans with their "masterful grasp of material things" would prove themselves capable of meeting any challenge. Outer space, Johnson liked to say, was the New World of the next 500-1,000 years as "men will be as deeply impelled

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<sup>282</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, *Papers of the Presidents*, 1967, "Remarks Following an Inspection of NASA's Michoud Assembly Facility Near New Orleans," December 12, 1967, 1123-1124; LBJ Presidential Library, Office Files of White House Aids, Box 29, George Reedy, "Statements of LBJ on Space Exploration," Prepared by the NASA Historical Staff, Washington DC (no date); LBJ's "Address before the International Symposium on Physics and Medicine of Atmosphere and Space," San Antonio TX, November 11, 1958; Lyndon B. Johnson: "Special Message to the Congress on Election Reform: The Political Process in America," May 25, 1967. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=28268> (accessed June 18, 2012).

<sup>283</sup> Transcript, Donald F. Hornig Oral History Interview I, 12/4/68, by David G. McComb, Internet Copy, LBJ Library: 29.

toward space exploration as the men of the 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries were to explore the Western Hemisphere....Freedom as we know it would not have come into existence, and certainly would not have survived, without the opening of this great new frontier on earth.” The implication was clear: as with the American frontier, pioneering in Space would enable democracy and freedom to endure, defeat or at least contain the Soviets, and change the rules and responsibilities of government for the better.<sup>284</sup> LBJ’s most enduring priority, sending an American to the moon ahead of the Soviets, never wavered, and six months after leaving office that goal was reached.<sup>285</sup>

Tellingly, Johnson’s fascination with space flight and pioneering appears to have manifested itself in his own personal efforts to fuse modern technology with the Old West. The LBJ Ranch blended a rural world that represented the frontier image of an older America with a host of modern conveniences. Along with more than 200 registered brood cows and calves, four bulls, a flock of sheep and goats, numerous hogs, and about one dozen horses and ponies, the Ranch featured an enormous communications tower replete with satellite dishes, canned muzak piped through LBJ’s home and five live oak trees beyond it, his personal JetStar aircraft, a custom-fitted Sikorsky helicopter, a mile-long airstrip with LBJ’s pure-bred Herefords grazing alongside, an 18-foot speedboat, 28-foot cabin cruiser, white Lincoln Continental convertible with a specially rigged electric “cattlehorn,” Corvettes, an Amphicar, more than a dozen colour TVs, 30 two-way radio sets, a 300+ foot radio tower, video and

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<sup>284</sup> Address Before Dolphin Club Meeting, Port Arthur, TX, October 22, 1959 and *The Congressional Record* (May 3, 1960): 8532-8533 in the LBJ Library, Office Files of White House Aids, Box 29, George Reedy, “Statements of LBJ on Space Exploration,” Prepared by the NASA Historical Staff, Washington DC (no date).

<sup>285</sup> One of the most balanced and complete assessments of LBJ’s motives and role in the Space program is Robert A. Divine, “Lyndon Johnson and the Politics of Space,” in Robert A. Divine, ed., *The Johnson Years, Volume Two: Vietnam, the Environment, and Science* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1982): 217-248.

audio reel-to-reel tape machines, and 70 telephones (six phone outlets were placed conveniently around his heated pool, and one even underneath the dining room table). Like LBJ himself, the Ranch cherished the past but also looked forward and seized newness and change. The President believed that “his people” had been victorious in their conquest of the continent; perhaps for Johnson the ultimate triumph was to experience the mysteries of the sublime Pedernales River country in comfort. LBJ’s emphasis on new technologies to resolve problems out West certainly resonated with the views of University of Texas historian Walter Prescott Webb, who had been appointed by VP Johnson as the premier historian of the 98<sup>th</sup> meridian. LBJ, arguably, used such gimmicks in an effort to appeal to voters and build cordial relationships with foreign leaders through creating his own image as the nation’s number one high-tech Cowboy. But just as significantly, it was consistent with the mid-twentieth century interpretations of the Frontier Myth that blended the nation’s past heritage with its hopes for future sustained progress.<sup>286</sup> For most Americans, science and technology itself were frontiers.

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<sup>286</sup> These numerous technological devices are described in detail in a series of displays at the Lyndon Baines Johnson National Historic Park, visited by the author on September 30, 2011; Webb, *The Great Plains*; William W. Savage, *Comic Books and America, 1945-1954* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990): 69.



**Figure 5.4: President Johnson and Vice President-elect Hubert Humphrey in front of Marine One at the LBJ Ranch, November 4, 1964.** (Courtesy the LBJ Library, Photo No. 436-253-WH64)

### **LBJ: Cowboy Colossus**

In terms of his personality, LBJ seemed to epitomize Turner's famous line about the "typical" American frontiersman who was said to be "lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends." Johnson was the consummate DC political power player who could get things done for the folks back home, but also possessed a Western frontier style that most Americans could relate to and that many could see in themselves. Though in the thick of beltway politics he was also viewed and admired as a maverick: a genuine colossal presence reminiscent of Wister's *Virginian*—though markedly less subtle. Historian Robert Caro has vividly described the overwhelming



force of Johnson's character. When on the floor as Senate Majority Leader, Johnson tended his herd, "prowl[ing] the big chamber restlessly, moving up and down the aisles, back and forth along the rows of desks....Moving over to a senator seated at a desk, and then to another, he would sit down beside a man or bend over him, sometimes with both his arms planted firmly on the target's desk, so that he could not rise and get away." In the apt words of one journalist, Lyndon Baines Johnson was "'the Western movie barging into the room.'"<sup>287</sup>

Unlike President Reagan, "the great communicator" who would have handlers, Johnson "the great persuader" had advisors—most of whom were handled by LBJ himself. Tom Wicker of the *New York Times* observed in "Lyndon Johnson is 10 Feet Tall," that LBJ's Western "nature" was the reason why he loomed over his administration: "the breezy, two-fisted, overpower range king who rules from horizon to horizon and from can-see to can't see with iron will and fast gun. Lyndon Johnson," Wicker quipped, "may be the best John Wayne part ever written." Like TR, LBJ believed in the "the bully pulpit"—always teaching, preaching, writing, pleading, complaining, "always coming on." In his first two years in office, LBJ had pushed through Congress laws which had overthrown legal segregation in the South, gained Southern blacks the right to vote, created Medicare and Medicaid, and moved to bring substantive new protections to the nation's environment. LBJ wielded power in a way that few presidents, including certainly his predecessor, ever had. And his frontier mannerisms and all-American, cowboy colossus image, whether deliberate or not, had arguably played a significant role in his ability to garner tremendous support for his programs

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<sup>287</sup> Caro, *Master of the Senate*, xviii; Unnamed journalist quoted in *Ibid*, xviii.

from across the country.<sup>288</sup> But the Frontier Myth structure he had been shaped by and relied upon so heavily for his political success was about to undergo a series of serious challenges. And as events caused the myth to lose its power and influence, Johnson too, in the second phase of his presidency, found that his own undeniable strong-suit—the power to persuade—would begin to elude him.

## **Conclusion**

The ideas of the first Cowboy President, TR, were used in many ways as a basic template for President Lyndon Johnson to follow in his updated interpretation and deployment of the Frontier Myth in domestic policies. In the years leading up to his Presidency, LBJ and his staff worked hard to cut his image loose from its backward-thinking Southern connections and promote a new Western frontier-of-the-future persona that would win over the nation. For the most part, this shrewdness served Johnson remarkably well helping him win the presidency, overwhelmingly, in his own right against the Conservative Cowboy Goldwater in 1964, and in promoting a frontier-inspired liberal agenda for the mid-1960s.

Like TR, Lyndon Johnson thought big. During the first half of LBJ's presidency, he committed the bulk of his energies toward bringing greater equality of opportunity to all Americans and increasing emphasis on community through promotion his liberal programs. For Johnson the forward looking Frontier Myth was a catalyst for creating his Great Society, establishing Civil Rights, and exploring outer space. Johnson deployed

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<sup>288</sup> Tom Wicker, "Lyndon Johnson Is 10 Feet Tall," *New York Times Magazine* (May 23, 1965): 88-92 in the LBJ Library, Democratic National Committee Files, Series 1, Box 147. Another journalist drew some similar comparisons of LBJ to TR, stating that "Like Theodore Roosevelt, Johnson has a compulsion to be 'the corpse at every funeral, the bride at every wedding.'" Stewart Alsop, "The One Weakness of L.B.J.," *Saturday Evening Post* (September 19, 1964): 12.

the frontier imagery as a medium for communicating a message that drew on the past to explain the future and to create a future that was impervious to the regional characteristics that had previously facilitated such non-progressive characteristics as southern segregation, unequal access to education, economic despair and state control over the nation's wilderness heritage. The President cast himself, and was projected as, "a man of the land" who would lead all Americans to a "better and brighter" future by carrying on the tradition of his pioneering ancestors who had worked so hard to build up infrastructures that would make life better for their own children and future generations. Johnson aimed to be the most successful progressive president of the twentieth century. The "restless optimism of the man," as one admiring observer put it and Johnson's own oft-repeated belief that "can do" Americans could rise to any challenge tapped into that same kind of optimism that Ray Allen Billington had identified in the 1950s as *the* outstanding feature of the Frontier Myth. Until mid-1965 this approach appears to have worked in spades for LBJ, in part, as this dissertation contends, because events of this period reinforced or, at least, worked within the parameters of the myth. Johnson called for much more government intervention and projected frontier imagery forward in time to create what he hoped would be a nation free from the pioneer struggles of the past with its vexing poverty and discrimination. In terms of legislation no President before or since made a greater effort to be inclusive in supporting the poor and minorities, leveling the playing field of opportunity for all Americans, and preserving the nation's park lands for future generations. Being "on the people's side" in terms of domestic programs remained, in Johnson's mind, a priority of his administration and he consciously summed up the domestic, liberal victories in Congress in frontier terms: proudly referring to them as his "showdowns for progress."

His promotion of space exploration, meanwhile, was bolstered by the belief that outer space exploration would continue to stoke that “socio-cultural furnace” [the frontier] from which American democracy was forged. The Frontier Myth of the mid-twentieth century and early Johnson years with its Cowboy Code, *Gunsmoke*, and *Magnificent Seven* philosophy of liberal democracy, selflessness and community had become so deeply entrenched as a structure of American society that many of these ideas were accepted—even without specific explanation—by most Americans. But, just as it seemed destined to reach its zenith, the myth of the frontier as a thesis of liberalism and inclusion was about to begin toppling over a cliff.<sup>289</sup>

An acceleration of events, including a major war on the other side of the world in Southeast Asia, and the eruption of violence and rapid social change at home, would throttle many Americans’ assumptions about Johnson and the Frontier Myth. As we shall explore in the next chapter, a series of explosive developments, occurring both inside and from outside the United States (and worsened still by a growing public distrust of the “Cowboy Colossus” Johnson himself), would combine to destroy the Frontier Myth consensus and turn the myth increasingly *against* LBJ’s Administration and many of its programs. In the process, these events would destroy or seriously undermine Johnson’s efforts to bring some of his progressive vision of the Frontier Myth forward into the latter decades of the twentieth century, and beyond.

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<sup>289</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, “Remarks at a Reception in Fort Worth Honoring Representative James C. Wright of Texas,” May 29, 1968. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=28895> (accessed June 6, 2012); “socio-cultural furnace” quotation in Michael P. Malone, “Beyond the Last Frontier: Toward a New Approach to American Western History,” *Western Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 20 (November 1989): 410.

## VI.

### **Myth in a Quagmire: Vietnam and LBJ's 'Second Presidency'**

Hell, Vietnam is just like the Alamo....Well, by God, I'm going to go—and I thank the Lord that I've got the men who want to go with me, from McNamara right on down to the littlest private who's carrying a gun.

—President Johnson to the National Security Council,  
1965<sup>290</sup>

In so many aspects of his Presidency, Lyndon Johnson would have done much better had he followed the old West African proverb often quoted by his hero Theodore Roosevelt: “Speak softly and carry a big stick.” The Frontier image served him so well as he transferred from the Senate, through the Vice Presidency, and into the early years in the White House, began to turn sour on LBJ in his “second presidency.” From 1963 to 1965 Johnson had taken on some of the nation’s largest domestic problems like a bronco buster but, along with initiating some remarkable and innovative achievements, from 1966 onward his efforts would be overtaken by a series of tragic events. The Frontier Myth had shaped LBJ’s own expectations for himself as President, how he viewed America’s “mission” in the world; it had also shaped the media and public’s expectations of success for their President and of how he would achieve it. During his first term in office, the Frontier Myth had provided an adequate and powerful narrative for Lyndon

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<sup>290</sup> LBJ quoted in Steinberg, *Sam Johnson's Boy*, 20.

Johnson's programs and policies both at home and abroad. But Johnson's own strict adherence to the liberal frontier myth structure—one encompassing optimism in dealing with any problem or challenge, promoting American democracy and social change at home and abroad, and of inevitable progress—proved incapable of explaining and accommodating the tumultuous events of 1966-1969.

As will be asserted over the next two chapters, the failed experience of Vietnam and plethora of national crises that swept over the nation from the late 1960s through the end of the 1970s would bring about a collapse of the liberal nationalist frontier myth. During this watershed period, Americans experienced failure to bring democracy to and produce a frontier-like victory in Southeast Asia; a wave of domestic race riots and assassinations; the growing “credibility gap” between the presidency and the public; a severe economic decline; the humiliations of the Iranian hostage crisis; and a perceived shellacking at the hands of an economically resurgent Japan. These events taken together created a kind of avalanche of perceived national failures causing the entire frontier mythic structure to change course in the span of just over a decade. As a result, the myth's structure would buckle under LBJ, recede during the 1970s, and ultimately hinge back outward in the 1980s, enabling the structure to be reformed and advance a radically different political agenda. Marshall Sahlins reminds us that all social structures (such as the frontier myth) have occasionally faced crises so disruptive that events could not be fully explained by the tenets embodied in the structures. Here is a profound case in point. Unable to deny the importance of the events of this watershed era, Americans' powerful frontier vision would radically change its emphasis away from its ideology of liberal progressivism into a temporary hiatus during the presidencies of Richard Nixon,

Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, and finally be resurrected in 1980 as a key symbol of the conservative “Reagan Revolution.”

### **“Johnson’s War” as a Political Earthquake**

The international event of the Vietnam War dominated Johnson’s second presidency and challenged the explanatory power of the Frontier Myth in ways that no other event had. The military engagement in this distant part of the world would prove his largest mistake and, arguably, the worst foreign policy disaster in American history. Much of Johnson’s own rationale for the war was based on Frontier Myth assumptions which, in the end, seriously hampered the Administration’s options and flexibility. The world was changing and Johnson, like American society in general, struggled to make sense of a rapidly changing world where people wondered if the old rules, the old assumptions, still applied. The structure strained under the challenges posed by the events of the later 1960s, each seeking to give new meaning to the other. LBJ believed that the Frontier Myth, provided it was applied in a forward looking fashion (as had been the case in domestic affairs) rather than a nostalgic and backward looking one, remained relevant both at home and abroad. But the inherent obligations that gave meaning to the frontier myth fed into what would become known as the tragedy of “Johnson’s War” in Southeast Asia and ultimately tore into the existing interpretations of the myth and caused his own ruination. The final year of Cowboy Johnson’s presidency, 1968, was nothing less than a “political earthquake” that would change the cultural landscape of the nation. The Frontier Myth would face a series of crises so

disruptive that it could no longer be invoked to explain the events taking place both at home and abroad.<sup>291</sup>

### **Trouble at “Credibility Gap”**

Since his early days in Congress, LBJ’s actions indicated that he felt the need to persuade the press to become his supporters and even his partisans. As President, Johnson manipulated individual journalists, carving out a special relationship with those who reported what he wanted. But over time his relationship with journalists became increasingly strained. LBJ had entered the presidency just at the time when the media was beginning to put politicians under a more intense spotlight; Johnson frequently made things much more difficult for himself by breaking the cowboy code and noticeably distorting the truth. As the print media fought with television to retain its share of the market, reporters became more and more analytical and critical—going beyond merely reporting the day’s events. Regarding frontier freedoms (such as the freedom of information) as something for himself but not for the American nation as a whole, Johnson had hoped to have direct control over and be the dispenser of government information, just as many of his predecessors had done. But along the way, he sometimes misled reporters to gain favorable news stories or to avoid open explanations of his policies. In the new media milieu of the 1960s, this approach backfired.

LBJ was so confident of America’s frontier mission in the world that he behaved as if the ends justified the means. This attitude hastened the collapse of the Frontier Myth

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<sup>291</sup> “Political earthquake” phrase used by Bruce Miroff, *The Liberals’ Moment: The McGovern Insurgency and the Identity Crisis of the Democratic Party* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2007): 2.



structure that had previously served him so well. A more aggressive and critical approach by the media required greater openness and honesty on the part of the President but by his second term in office Lyndon's own penchant for "whoppers" was exposed, enhancing the increasingly apparent mismatch between his actions and related events in the world, and the relevance of the Frontier Myth to explain them.

What became publicly known as President Johnson's "credibility gap," a term first used in 1965 by the *New York Herald Tribune*, contributed more and more to a decline in LBJ's relations with the press and ultimately in the public's trust in their president. Reporters discovered that the mythic Johnson was not as poor a youth as he had claimed, that he bent rules to amass his fortune, and that a number of his public statements—such as the alleged size of the 1964 budget and reports of successes and predictions for victory in Vietnam—seemed to reek of exaggeration or were simply false. Hugh Sidey cites another famous example:

A former Johnson aide tells how LBJ as a Senator was pointing out a ramshackle cabin on his Texas ranch which he described in Lincolnian detail as his birthplace. Johnson's mother was along on the ride, and when her son finished she mildly admonished him, 'Why Lyndon, you know you were born in a much better house closer to town which has been torn down.' The listener reports that Johnson replied, 'I know, Mama, but everybody has to have a birthplace.'<sup>292</sup>

In 1965, Johnson committed the first US combat troops to Vietnam, almost 200,000 soldiers, and this number rose steadily until troop levels reached more than half a million three years later. At the outset, number-crunching Defense Secretary

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<sup>292</sup> Francis Edward Cheslick, *Presidential Influence on the Media: A Descriptive Study of the Administrations of Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon* (MA Thesis, Wayne State University, Detroit MI, 1977): 107-109, copy in stacks at the LBJ Library, Austin Texas; Hugh Sidey, *A Very Personal Presidency: Lyndon Johnson in the White House* (New York: Atheneum, 1968): 167.

Robert McNamara was convinced that victory could be achieved by Christmas 1965. But as the Vietnam War dragged on through 1966 and 1967, without any end in sight, Johnson's popularity declined and the rules of the presidential-media relationship markedly changed. Throughout the country, optimism was being replaced by cynicism about the quality of the nation's leadership and about American society in general. Johnson's mindset did not help the situation since he viewed reporters who no longer offered favorable comments about him or his administration's policies as treasonous. He also suffered from the fact that more and more Americans were no longer judging him on his statements or his policies but on the lack of consistency between them. LBJ was slipping away from the narrative structures of the Frontier Myth. For, apparently, LBJ had never felt that his friend Gene Autry's Third Cowboy Commandment, "A cowboy always tells the truth," applied to him. Robert Caro tells us that dishonesty was not a new practice of LBJ's and that even in his younger days Lyndon had been given the public nickname 'Bull'. A former classmate of Johnson's, Edward Peils, explains why: "Because of his constant braggadocio. Because he was so full of bullshit, manure that people didn't believe him. Because he was a man who could just not tell the truth."<sup>293</sup>

Once the narrative structures of the Frontier Myth were confronted by the stark and harsh realities of the Vietnam War—which by 1965 had begun entering American living rooms on nightly newscasts—the public soon forgot about the achievements of the Great Society. The vague and abstract qualities of the frontier or Western myth still encompassed and described many of Johnson's domestic initiatives but could not be used to justify the outright falsehoods and dissembling brought out by the failing of

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<sup>293</sup> Autry's Cowboy Code in MacDonald, *Television and the Red Menace*, 135; Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson. Volume 1: The Path to Power* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1982): 160.

Johnson's policies in Vietnam. Simultaneously the credibility gap, LBJ's presenting of half-truths to gain political advantage, caused his good ole' cowpoke persona to wear dangerously thin.



**Figure 6.1: Proverbs 26:17 - "He Who Meddles In a Quarrel Not His Own..."** An early Vietnam War protest poster cleverly combines this Biblical passage with a controversial AP photo of the President—linking LBJ's "crude and rude" Hill Country behaviors with his decision to send American combat troops to Southeast Asia, c1965. (Vic Dinnerstein, *He Who Meddles in a Quarrel Not*

*His Own*, Photograph: AP, c1965, offset poster. Reprinted with permission of the Collection of the Center for the Study of Political Graphics; 10725)

## **The “Frontier Fight” of Vietnam as a Historical Event**

America’s Vietnam experience is typically spoken of as a policy quagmire that spanned more than a decade and ultimately tied LBJ to a tragic legacy that would overwhelm his outstanding legislative record. What has been missing from this interpretation is a recognition that the war was also an historical event that was so profoundly disruptive that it transformed the receptiveness of the American public to the long standing frontier mythology, and it was the disconnect of the myth from the popular consciousness that is the focus of this chapter.

Johnson’s decision to drastically escalate the U.S. military’s commitment to South Vietnam in its fight with the Communist North was in large part a product of his adherence to the significance and “lessons” of the frontier experience. As Ronnie Dugger points out, Johnson was well aware that his own family had fought it out in the frontier environment of a Texan Hill Country rife with feuding and revenge. After a Viet Cong attack on U.S. soldiers at Pleiku in early 1965, LBJ insisted that his decision to initiate the bombing of North Vietnam was in “retaliation.” Before long, though, he announced that this bombing, dubbed “Operation Rolling Thunder,” would continue indefinitely. “Sending President Johnson a telegram to stop the bombing,” writes Dugger, “was asking a Hatfield to stop killing the McCoys.” Johnson further fit the Vietnam War into the discourse of the frontier myth by characterizing the conflict as kind of struggle between cowboys and Indians, “good” and “evil.” The President pontificated that American troops should fight the Reds on the frontier to save the “decent” people and

civilize, in time, the Vietcong “savages.” It was a repeat or continuation of the long process of civilization versus savagery sequel, only this time the frontier fight was taking place in the jungles and rice paddies of Indochina. LBJ relished the danger and romance of the American frontier in the lives of his own ancestors. He and his daughter, Lynda Bird, were once photographed visiting the cellar where his grandmother, Eliza Bunton, hid with her baby during an Indian raid in the Texas Hill Country. Like many Americans at mid-twentieth century, he longed to recover the lost possibility of heroic achievement that the West seemed to have embodied.<sup>294</sup>

As the war in Vietnam escalated in the “second phase” of his presidency, however LBJ came under increasing attacks from anti-war protesters, columnists and editorial cartoonists who no longer viewed the frontier mythologies as capable of explaining and guiding American society—and by extension saw LBJ as a reckless, hapless and bullying cowboy. Cartoonists who had once portrayed Johnson’s cowboy persona in terms of an optimistic, innovative and humorous liberal figure now increasingly drew the Frontier President as a crude, befuddled and ruthless chief executive pursuing a lost cause.<sup>295</sup> The Vietnam draft had proven unpopular from the start in part because the war was being fought far away from America’s own shores, was not well understood, and because there had never been a formal declaration of war. As opinion about the conflict itself became increasingly divided this hostility only grew. The President, meanwhile, used “frontier logic” to try to convince himself and the public that he could successfully conduct both the war in Vietnam overseas and the War on Poverty at home. Johnson later explained his position to Doris Kearns, “I was determined to be a leader of war *and*

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<sup>294</sup> Dugger, *The Politician*, 43, 46; *Ibid* 36.

<sup>295</sup> The political cartoon collection at the LBJ Library in Austin contains more than 300 cowboy, rancher, and gunfighter depictions of LBJ—many of which reveal this evolution in imagery.

a leader of peace. I wanted both, believed in both, and I believed America had the resources to provide for both. After all, our country was built by pioneers who had a rifle in one hand to kill their enemies and an ax in the other to build their home and provide for their families.” Ultimately, Johnson’s personal adherence to the Frontier Myth of “sky’s the limit” prosperity would play a tragic role in the fate of the nation and cause much of his own political undoing.<sup>296</sup>



<sup>296</sup> See “US Can Continue the ‘Great Society’ and Fight in Vietnam, Johnson Says,” *Washington Post* (January 13, 1966): A1; Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 283.

**Figure 6.2** (Blaine MacDonald, Courtesy of the *Hamilton Spectator*, Canada) <sup>297</sup>

In the realm of international relations—which had never been Johnson’s strong suit—the president’s sly personal cynicism, conniving, and determination not to be victimized at the bargaining tables did not prevent him from buying into some prevailing American myths. To LBJ the self-reliant, independent cowboy of destiny, meeting challenges was what the nation was all about. There was a workable solution to every problem and Americans were an inherently “can do” peoples who possessed the “know how” to accomplish anything they willed: just as he had (LBJ, the kid from the hard scrabble, tough Texas outback, pointed out repeatedly how he had risen to the most powerful position in the “Free World”). All problems, Johnson devoutly believed, had solutions: America had conquered the Indians on the Frontier, beaten the Depression, beaten the Germans and their thuggish allies in two world wars, was pounding away at racial discrimination, had risen “above” European nations to become the world’s number one industrial giant, and was now meeting the challenge of the future to explore outer space. Americans were God’s chosen people: why else, in Johnson’s view, would they have become what he believed to be the richest, strongest and fiercest people history? America was exceptional just as the Western/Frontier story had claimed—the most wonderful place on earth (it was since LBJ had the evidence of himself and his ranch to prove it)—and as such, like the cowboy who saves the helpless, he had the obligation to export its greatness to the less fortunate.

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<sup>297</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Special Files: Cartoon Collections, Box 5, File 18—Vietnam (1 of 5 files). Blaine MacDonald, *Hamilton Spectator* (Canada), date unknown.

Many editorial cartoons, c1966-68, conveyed much the same message as Blaine MacDonald’s. In one of my favourites, LBJ is shown riding a Texas longhorn (“The Economy”)—tied to the beast’s right horn is a hefty “\$” bag entitled “War in Vietnam” and to the left an equally stuffed sack of cash labeled “War on Poverty.” An anxious LBJ rides atop while the bull sweats profusely, its eyes cross, legs bow, and tongue hangs out from the terrible strain. Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Special Files: Cartoon Collections, Box 3, File 13a—Economy (1 of 2 files). Burges Green, *Providence Journal*, December 30, 1966.

Using Hill Country talk, Johnson declared more than once that “If you let a bully come into your front yard, the next day he’ll be up on your porch, and the day after that he’ll rape your wife in your own bed.” Johnson’s bully analogies combined with his Indian raid stories and experiences in World War II and Korea all reinforced his belief that history had proven the folly of appearing weak in the face of an aggressor, and by extension demonstrated his belief in the interpretive power of the frontier myth with its simple definitions of right and wrong and the stark choices that guided frontier figures. LBJ scholars such as Thomas A. Bailey and Robert Dallek attest that this President believed in God, greatness, goodness and gunpowder. Hugh Sidey reports that on a top secret visit to Cam Ranh Bay on October 26, 1966, President Johnson faced his field commanders at the officers club and shouted over the noisy ceiling fans: “I thank you, I salute you, may the good Lord look over you and keep you until you come home with the coonskin on the wall.” If victory was what was needed to end the war then Johnson was telling them to go out there and win. After all, when a bully (North Vietnam) ragged you, LBJ explained to friends, you did not go off wining. Instead, like Daniel Boone, the Texas Rangers, TR, and countless other frontier western heroes, you gave him a good dose of his own medicine.<sup>298</sup>

Cultural and frontier historians point out that Lyndon Johnson’s background in the Hill Country instilled in him a foreign relations mentality that, beyond a certain point, a punch in the nose beats talk—and for Johnson this applied as much to foreign relations as it did to individual American personal relations. LBJ was born and raised in the heart

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<sup>298</sup> LBJ’s “bully” quotation in Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984): 321; “coonskin on the wall” quotation found in Sidey, *A Very Personal Presidency*, 150. President Johnson is first known to have employed the coonskin phrase much earlier, in a recorded telephone conversation about opposition to the Vietnam War with McGeorge Bundy in the spring of 1964. LBJ Library Telephone Conversation Collection, LBJ speaking with McGeorge Bundy, Tape# WH6405.10, Program No. 6 (May 27, 1964).



of the violent hill country region of central Texas and this characteristic of his homeland, along with its poverty, helped shape his presidential attitudes and values. According to Texas historian T.R. Fehrenbach, “Nowhere was frontier violence in America so bloody, or so protracted, as on the soil of Texas....The Mexican-Indian warfare, taken together, spawned an almost incredible amount of violence....Because of this history, the dominant Texas viewpoint was not that Texans settled Texas, but they conquered it.” Walter Prescott Webb writes, meanwhile, that the battle of the Pedernales—occurring right in the vicinity of Johnson City and the LBJ Ranch—“has good claims to being the first battle in which the six-shooter was used on mounted Indians.” In the spring of 1844, Webb adds, Texas Rangers riding out of San Antonio and into the Hill Country shot down more than 30 “marauding” Indians with Samuel Colt’s remarkable new weapon. Lyndon Johnson’s pride in his no-duty-to-retreat heritage was reflected in his relentless determination to defend what he believed to be American interests in South Vietnam. During the Congressional campaign in 1966 he told crowds in Des Moines that “the American people have never left any ally in a fight. And we do not intend to abandon South Vietnam now.” Johnson’s decision to bomb North Vietnam and commit large-scale, land forces to the region in 1965 was also justified in part through his personal infatuation with the gun fighting Texas Ranger, Captain LH McNelly, and related declaration to the American public that “courage is a man who keeps coming on.” “And that’s what we do in Vietnam,” he once told Clark Clifford, “just keep on a-coming.” The Communists did not respect anything but force; you had to let them know who had the biggest guns, the quickest draw, and the toughest heart. The tradition of the Texan frontier spirit and of the Alamo that respected physical

combat when challenged was a cultural environment which, if he is to be taken at his own word, strongly influenced his attitude toward the war in Vietnam.<sup>299</sup>

### **The Alamo, *The Green Berets* and America's Great Frontiering Mission**

Just how much impact another more widely known event in Texas' history—the Battle of the Alamo and its related “Alamo syndrome”—had on Johnson's foreign policy decisions is difficult to gauge, but it is there. For LBJ, Texas history's most sacred battle dating back 130 years, represented the ultimate expression of human courage and sacrifice. Only 100 miles from Johnson City, those heroic frontier figures Davy Crockett, Jim Bowie, Colonel William Travis, and James Bonham died, according to the American Frontier Myth, in the name of independence and freedom.

According to Randy Roberts and James S Olson, LBJ believed that the Alamo epitomized the American frontier experience and this shaped both his outlook and policy decisions—especially as they related to the Cold War and Vietnam: “The Alamo was ingrained into Johnson's intellectual makeup, central to the way he made sense of world events.” For LBJ and millions of other Americans, the defenders of the Alamo were real life super-heroes who made the patriot's ultimate sacrifice, carrying freedom's fight to the backward Mexicans in the cause of Texas independence and, ultimately, American expansion.<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>299</sup> T.R. Fehrenbach, *Lone Star: A History of Texas and the Texans* (New York: American Legacy Press, 1983): 447; Webb quoted in Sidey, *A Very Personal Presidency*, 22; LBJ quoted in John D. Pomfret, “The Johnson Formula: President Seeking to Neutralize G.O.P. On 2 Major Issues in Coming Campaign” (July 4, 1966) clipping found in LBJ Library, Democratic National Committee Files, Series 1, Box 151; LBJ quoted in Clyde Milner, Carol A. O'Connor, Martha Sandweiss, eds., *The Oxford History of the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994): 422; also see Dugger, *The Politician*, 41-42.

<sup>300</sup> Randy Roberts and James S. Olson, *A Line in the Sand: The Alamo in Blood and Memory* (New York: The Free Press, 2001): 279.

Lyndon Johnson wanted so much to have a blood connection to those dead heroes that in 1966 while on a tour of Vietnam, he created one by boldly claiming that “my great-great grandfather died at the Alamo.” Investigative journalists soon discovered, however, that the President’s great-great grandfather was actually a real estate trader who died at home in bed—forcing Johnson to retract his statement.<sup>301</sup> Johnson similarly insisted he personally had been fired upon by “a Japanese ace” during World War II; but, as with the claims about his great-great grandfather, no evidence could be found to support the claim.<sup>302</sup> It could be assumed, and often has been, that Johnson was lying about the Alamo connection and the Japanese ace to promote his own status. But it is also likely that by this time Johnson’s connection to the Frontier mythology had convinced him that these stories and connections were actually true: that the power of the narrative’s structure of the Frontier Myth had transformed the actual events of history in Johnson’s own mind so that he re-imagined himself and his family as central players in the Frontier fight and stories of heroic Americanism. Here was a vivid case in point of how the structure had completely transformed LBJ’s own understanding of the events of history. By contrast the event of the Vietnam War would, for the nation, play a significant role in transforming the structure of the Frontier Myth by starkly revealing its shortcomings as a lens through which all American history, past, present, and future, could be understood and explained.

According to biographers, as a boy Lyndon missed few cowboy classics at Johnson City’s “Opera House” because its owner paid him off in tickets for passing out handbills

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<sup>301</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, *Public Papers of the Presidents, 1966*, “Remarks to American and Korean Servicemen at Camp Stanley, Korea,” November 1, 1966: 1287. LBJ did have a great-uncle, John Wheeler Bunton, who fought (but did not die) in the Battle of San Jacinto—a story his mother related to him many times; Roberts and Olson, *A Line in the Sand*, 279-280.

<sup>302</sup> A discussion of LBJ’s dramatic stories of his encounter with Japanese zeros appears in: Paul K. Conkin, *Big Daddy from the Pedernales* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986): 108.

of coming attractions. But Lyndon and his friends' greatest obsession was acting out the early history of the Lone Star State, especially those revolving around the Alamo. Back in 1905 his father, Sam Johnson, had co-sponsored a bill to purchase the Alamo Mission for \$6,500 to prevent it from being torn down and replaced by a hotel. "He took me as a little boy down there," Johnson recalled with pride, "and showed it to me many times." According to childhood friends, little Lyndon poured over the details of the attack to the point that the Alamo recreations became a kind of religious experience for him. No boy felt prouder than Lyndon Baines Johnson as he pretended to be Colonel William Barrett Travis drawing his line in the earth, or heroic defenders Jim Bowie or Davy Crockett, leading the legendary group of 187. Tears flowed down Lyndon's cheeks when he would read Colonel Travis' letter to his government which included the line, "Take care of my son." No boy who cared could ever forget March 1836 and the glory of the brave men who died at the Alamo in the name of Texas' independence.<sup>303</sup>

Johnson proclaimed repeatedly throughout his life that the men at the Alamo had died like "real men" and that to show weakness was unmanly. And just as countless Western frontier and cowboy heroes of LBJ's upbringing had asserted, and TR had earlier expounded in his lecture on "The Strenuous Life" and its virtues, nations like men could *not* afford to be unmanly. In the nuclear age—as if pioneering Americans were still menaced by Native Americans while attempting to fetch water on the frontier—Johnson liked to say, "He's a good man to go to the well with."<sup>304</sup> Men had to be strong, like the Alamo's 187, his father who had stood up to the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, TR with his big stick, and FDR pushing the country forward to defeat Hitler and

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<sup>303</sup> LBJ quoted in Dugger, *The Politician*, 31; Steinberg, *Sam Johnson's Boy*, 20.

<sup>304</sup> LBJ quoted in Dugger, *The Politician*, 144.

Tojo. In the President's mind, all American men fighting in Vietnam should be just as ready to give up their lives in the defense of liberty.

Perhaps of all the characteristics of the mythic Frontier hero, the one that Johnson wanted most applied to himself was that of manly toughness and virtue. As a Senator he must have been pleased by a *Look* magazine article from 1959, which makes much of Lyndon Johnson's "masculine appeal to the female voter." Part of LBJ's effort to build up his own "tough guy," frontier-type image involved cutting down others for their comparative lack of virile manliness. LBJ's self-promoted machismo, at others expense, included: post-assassination mocking of "yellow, sickly, sickly...weak and pallid... not a man's man" Jack Kennedy and his family's vacationland on that "female island," Martha's Vineyard; belittling Hubert Humphrey for not being "a real man" because "he cried as easily as a woman"; spending lengthy periods at gatherings of those he considered "real men" while belittling his favourite target of all, Adlai Stevenson, for his sophisticated accent ("tomawto") and other characteristics he deemed effeminate; and dismissing Lady Bird's doubts about the war because "of course...it was *like* a woman to be uncertain." "Being a woman" his wife may have had an "excuse" for weakness but to say "not a man's man" were the most damning words in LBJ's lexicon.<sup>305</sup>

The degree to which Johnson had linked his own manhood directly to the Vietnam War—America's modern frontier conflict—was made crudely evident after a 1967 cabinet meeting. Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall stayed behind for less formal discussions and before long his boss had launched into a tirade about "his war" in Asia.

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<sup>305</sup> Bill Davidson, "Lyndon Johnson: Can a Southerner Be Elected President?" *Look*, Vol. 23 (August 18, 1959): 64.

Johnson's gender-mockery is described in Robert Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson. Volume 4: The Passage of Power* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2012): 33; Larry L. King, "Machismo in the White House: LBJ and Vietnam," *American Heritage*, Vol. 27 (1976): 100, and in Reedy, *Lyndon B. Johnson: A Memoir*, 23.

According to Udall, Johnson shouted at him and the few others present, “Who the hell was Ho Chi Minh, anyway, that he thought he could push America around? Then the President did an astonishing thing: he unzipped his trousers, dangled a given appendage, and asked his shocked associates: ‘Has Ho Chi Minh got anything like that?’” Johnson’s self-image of himself was as the lead in America’s twentieth century frontier experience. Manly, tough, self-reliant, the cowboy president would lead the cavalry’s assault on a weaker, inferior society, defeat the enemy and bring liberation, prosperity and democracy to a previously backward region.<sup>306</sup>

Early on in the LBJ Presidency, some editorial cartoonists apparently bought into Johnson’s comparisons of his own frontier manhood to that of diminutive and petulant Asian “Reds”—though in less graphic terms than those used by the President on Udall, et al. Gib Crockett’s cartoon in *The Washington Star* just one week after the assassination of JFK shows a tall, cool LBJ in full cowboy regalia with a six-shooter in his holster, bent over and looking down—with a paternal, even slightly amused expression—on a diminutive version of Mao Tse-tung (Figure 6.3). In contrast to the hulking new US President, mini-Mao is behaving like a kid-bully with his fists lifted in a “put’em up” position as he jumps hysterically up and down in a tantrum.

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<sup>306</sup> Udall’s description of LBJ’s performance appears in King, *Machismo*,” 99.



**Figure 6.3: More-than-a-cowboy LBJ towers over a diminutive Chairman Mao.** (Gib Crockett, *Washington Star*, November 29, 1963. Reproduced under the Fair Dealing [educational purposes] provision of the Canadian *Copyright Act*)<sup>307</sup>

As indicated, Johnson thought throughout his lifetime in terms of American exceptionalism: he believed in *American* opportunity, responsibility, good intentions, superiority, infallibility and destiny. As a child he had learned a poem which he often quoted as an adult, proclaiming that “the most beautiful sight his eyes had beheld was ‘the flag of my country in a foreign land.’” At home Johnson showed great compassion

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<sup>307</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Special Files: Cartoon Collection, Box 7, File 24, Foreign Issues: India, Kashmir, Pakistan, China, Russia, [Middle East] Arabia, Israel, Egypt, Indonesia. Gib Crockett, *Washington Star*, November 29, 1963.

for the poor and minorities but in politics and international relations he subscribed wholly to the survival of the fittest and the notion that the big fish ate the little fish. When it served his goals, LBJ also insisted on “evening the odds” to create a fair fight. Among the most complex of presidents ever to occupy the White House, LBJ could be both pacifist and aggressive, peaceful and warlike, gentle and tough, a tolerant champion of Civil Rights but, at times, still paternalistic. Up against what he viewed as a global, Communist monolith, LBJ would lead the pioneering forces westward that would bring light into the darkness, reportedly telling his staff that: “We’re going to liberate those poor little boogers [the South Vietnamese], and I’ll be known as the great emancipator.”<sup>308</sup>

Whether Johnson ever actually read Frederick Jackson Turner or Theodore Roosevelt’s writings that shaped and gave coherence to the Frontier Myth is not clear but what is certain is that the frontier myth permeated and informed all aspects of Johnson’s thinking and actions.<sup>309</sup> In 1966, Johnson declared as a matter of fact that “So many of our pioneer ancestors often ventured into the wilderness with only three possessions—their rifle, their axe, and their Bible.” Turner had mentioned the rifle and axe in 1910, specifically, as those tools of the greatest necessity to the pioneer. “They

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<sup>308</sup> King, “Machismo in the White House,” 8-13, 98-101; see also Louis H. Lapham, “Who Is Lyndon Johnson?” *Saturday Evening Post* (September 11, 1965): 70; Johnson’s “poor little boogers” quotation in Ronald Kessler, *Inside the White House* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995).

<sup>309</sup> LBJ did quote directly from Turner’s thesis in his speech proposing the Residency Voting Act of 1967. The President stated that: “Seventy years ago, the great American historian Frederick Jackson Turner wrote these words: ‘Behind institutions, behind constitutional reforms and modifications, lie the vital forces that call these organs into life and shape them to meeting changing conditions. The peculiarity of American institutions is the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people....’ This,” Johnson asserted, “represents a valid exposition of the vitality of our democratic process as it has endured for almost two hundred years.”

Lyndon B. Johnson, “Special Message to the Congress on Election Reform: The Political Process in America,” May 25, 1967. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=28268&st1=#axzz1yArTXvu1> (accessed June 18, 2012).



meant,” wrote Turner, “a training in aggressive courage, in domination, in directness of action, in destructiveness...But even this backwoodsman was more than a mere destroyer. He had visions. He was a finder as well as a fighter—the trail maker for civilization, the inventor of new ways” for “quite as deeply fixed in the pioneer’s mind as the ideal of individualism was the idea of democracy.” Similarly, Lyndon Johnson’s fundamental foreign policy was the promise and purpose of a worldwide war on poverty in the name of the values of individualism and democracy, along with the use of massive firepower to attain the immediate thing, stopping the Vietcong in Vietnam without waiting for the United Nations. Johnson once explained:

We have two phases of the war out there. I am going to let you in on a secret. You have heard just about the military phase; this other has been kept under wraps. We do not know much about it, because Captain Carpenter giving an order to come in to bomb his position is much more dramatic than some fellow that is washing up the kids, and treating their wounds, and teaching them to read and write—a Marine who has fought all day, that is working all night to help in these things.

But we are doing a great job there on health...and on conservation, and on beautification, and on housing, and on slums in this country [and it] is contagious. And it is moving to other countries. It is setting an example for other countries.<sup>310</sup>

Johnson’s remarks were consistent with those he had made back in 1965 and captured by Fred O. Siebel of *The Richmond Times-Dispatch* in his “Stretching It Around the

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<sup>310</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, “Remarks at a Ceremony Marking 1966 as ‘The Year of the Bible,’” (January 19, 1966), UCSB American Presidency Project , <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=27559&st=&st1=#axzz1exdb2JJg> (November 27, 2011); Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962): 269, 270, 273; Lyndon B. Johnson, “Remarks to the Delegates to a Conference of State Legislative Leaders,” (June 16, 1966), UCSB American Presidency Project , <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=27652&st=Captain+Carpenter&st1=#axzz1exdb2JJg> (November 27, 2011). Some of these passages from Turner and LBJ (though inaccurately quoted for both) can also be found in Dugger, *The Politician*, 132-133.

World” editorial cartoon. Here an animated-LBJ appears in his Stetson, boots and spurs proclaiming: “We mean to show that this nation’s dream of a Great Society does not stop at the water’s edge. It is not just an American Dream.” As he speaks, Johnson is busy wrapping a “The Great Society” ribbon around the globe which lists its features: “War on Ignorance, War on Poverty, War on Disease, War on Crime, Etc-Etc-Etc.” In a news release by the Democratic National Committee in 1966, LBJ was also quoted as saying, “The overriding rule which I want to affirm is that our foreign policy must always be an extension of our domestic policy.” This, for Johnson, was America’s great mission and gift to the world. LBJ, then, envisioned a continuation of the pioneer’s quest of bringing a superior American way of life to foreign frontiers as he now eyed American interests throughout the world. But his testing ground, across the Pacific in Southeast Asia, would prove ill-suited and highly problematic region to fulfill this alleged “destiny.”<sup>311</sup>

Perhaps the most fatal error of Lyndon Johnson’s presidency was his projection of the Western image/structure onto the rest of the world. For LBJ, the Frontier Myth experience that had made “the greatest country of Earth” could serve as a narrative for the rest of the world as well. But what he regarded as creating opportunities for the Frontier Myth to take root overseas was interpreted by people in other parts of the globe others as an attempt to push American-style democracy, values and aspirations on peoples with vastly different outlooks. It was a recipe for disaster and failure. Blinded by the Frontier Myth, LBJ could not comprehend alternative possibilities or traditions to those that he had whole heartedly committed to defending and promoting himself since childhood. In keeping with this myopic view, President Johnson’s first attempted

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<sup>311</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Special Files: Cartoon Collection, Box 3, File 12b—Great Society. Fred O’Siebel, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, September 26, 1965; LBJ Library, Democratic National Committee Files, Series 1, Box 151, “LBJ Politics 1966: Non-political Tour of Western States” file, News Release B-4174, August 29, 1966.

solution for resolving the war in Vietnam involved the extension of “American” values through the offer of a massive economic project to develop the Mekong Valley (“Old Ho can’t turn me down, old Ho can’t turn me down,” he kept repeating to aids after making the offer). LBJ had read Barbara Ward’s book *Rich Nations, Poor Nations* over and over again and was convinced, through his own simplistic interpretation, that the United States could raise the standard of living in any country if the Communists could be defeated or at least subdued. What LBJ failed to comprehend was that foreign leaders were unwilling to bargain with him the same way that politicians, labour leaders and businessmen did back home: that Uncle Ho was not George Meany.

As the editor of the *Waukesha* [Wisconsin] *Freemen* later observed, LBJ “wanted the world to work by his clock and when it didn’t he once remarked, the trouble with foreigners is ‘they’re not like folks you were reared with.’” Johnson could not accept or adjust to the reality that foreign relations had to be handled differently than domestic affairs. Insisting that Hanoi would not negotiate, Johnson declared that “freedom’s frontiers” were “under attack” and that “I have searched high and wide and I am a reasonably good cowboy and I can’t even rope anybody and bring him in that is willing to talk reason....” Initially public opinion polls and the popular press supported Johnson’s view and his decisions as “prudent.” But by 1967-1968, when it became clear that attempts to plug the American system in overseas were not working, confidence in this approach and in the President collapsed. Johnson had become a victim in an event versus structure dichotomy where the former, Vietnam, was sucking the life from the latter: LBJ’s cherished pole star, the Frontier Myth.<sup>312</sup>

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<sup>312</sup> “Old Ho” quotation and significance of Barbara Ward’s book in George Reedy, *Lyndon Johnson: A Memoir*, 23; Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 321; A detailed account of Johnson’s pledges and offers of aid to Vietnam is found in the LBJ Library, National Security File, Country File, Vietnam, Box 201,

Policy analysts might have counseled Johnson to adjust his policies to suit the international context. But Hollywood provided other answers. Between 1965 and 1967 LBJ's Administration corresponded regularly with American movie legend John Wayne. The "Duke" wanted to make a movie that would celebrate and justify American military intervention in South East Asia – a western set in modern times on the eastern continent. What the Duke wanted in return was government aid in making the film. LBJ was ripe for the opportunity.

LBJ may have been a Democrat, but he was a Stetson-wearing one, and that made him a straight shooter in the Duke's staunch Republican eyes. Johnson needed help communicating the frontier myth (both abroad and increasingly at home). What John Wayne needed was help to finance and film *The Green Berets*. Wayne wrote to the President and told him of his intention to create a feature film to shore up support for the Vietnam War both at home and abroad. "Perhaps you remember the scene from the film 'The Alamo'," Wayne wrote to LBJ, "when one of Davy Crockett's Tennesseans said: 'What are we doing here in Texas fighting—it ain't our ox that's getting gored.' Crockett [played by Wayne himself in the film] replied: 'Talkin' about whose ox gets gored figure this: a fella gets in the habit of gorin' oxes, it whets his appetite, may gore yours next.' Unquote. And we don't want people like Kosygin, Mao-Tse-Tung, or the like, 'Gorin' our oxes.'"<sup>313</sup>

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Memorandum from Horace Busby to President Lyndon Johnson, "Your Statements in Vietnam," April 1, 1965; *Waukesha Freeman's* editor quoted in Edward W. Chester, "Lyndon Baines Johnson, an American 'King Lear': A Critical Evaluation of His Newspaper Obituaries," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Spring 1991): 326; "Freedom's frontiers" quote in Dugger, *The Politician*, 143; See "Man of the Year: Lyndon B. Johnson, The Prudent Progressive," *Time*, January 1, 1965. Accessed at: <http://www.time.com/printout/0,8816,841674,00.html> (October 24, 2011).

<sup>313</sup> LBJ Library, Reference Files, John Wayne file, Incoming Correspondence from John Wayne, Hollywood CA, to President Lyndon B. Johnson, Washington DC (December 28, 1965).

In response, White House aide Bill Moyers informed Wayne that the President remembered the film and “does indeed...understand that ox-goring has a way of whetting an aggressor’s appetite.” John Wayne wrote back the following month that “We want to show the professional soldier carrying out his duty of death; but, also, his extra-curricular duties—diplomats in dungarees—helping small communities, giving them medical attention, toys for their children, and little things like soap, which can become all important.” One promoter of *The Green Berets* insisted that it “isn’t so much about winning the war against the Vietcong as it is about winning the hearts and minds of the American public.” After reviewing the script which, along with plenty of killing, featured humanitarian Special Forces’ caring for a war orphan nicknamed “Ham Chunk,” Moyers responded that he found the project “most exciting.” By 1966, Wayne and his son Michael, the film’s producer, had obtained the full military cooperation and material from the White House that they had requested.<sup>314</sup>

*The Green Berets* is Hollywood’s only film about the war in Vietnam shot and released during the conflict. In terms of allegory, it may also be the last of the straightforward, traditional frontier Westerns. Michael Wayne told *Variety* magazine: “We’re not making a political picture; we’re making a picture about a bunch of right guys...Cowboys and Indians....Americans are the good guys and the Viet Cong are the bad guys....Maybe we shouldn’t have destroyed all those Indians, but when you are

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<sup>314</sup> Outgoing correspondence from Bill Moyers, Special Assistant to the President, to John Wayne (January 18, 1966) in *Ibid*; Wayne to Moyers (February 18, 1966) in *Ibid*; Moyers to Wayne (February 24, 1966) in *Ibid*. The “hearts and minds” quote appears in Ronald H. Carpenter, “America’s Tragic Metaphor: Our Twentieth Century Combatants as Frontiersmen,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 76 (1990): 12.

White House Special Assistant Jack Valenti’s initial reaction to Wayne’s movie proposal was revealing. In a Memo to LBJ, he wrote: “Wayne’s politics are wrong, but insofar as Vietnam is concerned, his views are right. If he made the picture he would be saying the things we want said.” Later that year, Valenti resigned his White House post to become president of the Motion Picture Association of America. Memorandum from Jack Valenti to President Johnson (January 6, 1966) in LBJ Library, Reference Files, John Wayne file.

making a picture, the Indians are the bad guys.” The structure of the frontier myth had thus subsumed the event itself. This *Green Berets*’ guise for the Old West is also evident in: the air cavalry’s arrival just in time to save a Special Forces base where the palisade and tower resemble a frontier fort and its gate proclaims “Dodge City”; and the starring role of John Wayne himself, as Colonel Mike Kirby, the archetypal screen Westerner who seems right at home in in Special Forces jungle fatigues. In the closing scene Colonel Kirby explains to double-orphaned Ham Chunk that he will take care of the youngster—while in the background the sun sets symbolically, if inexplicably, in the West behind the China Sea which lies east of Vietnam.<sup>315</sup>

Wayne fought the war in make-believe in a film that offered a memory of American greatness and a promise of things to come that many of his fans still wanted to live by. By the time of its delayed release in 1968, however, a growing number of critics now saw the cost of the war as outweighing its benefits and berated the Duke’s version of the Vietnam conflict as simplistic, naïve and absurd. *Chicago Sun-Times* movie critic Roger Ebert gave the film zero stars and chided the film for its “cowboys and Indians” approach, endless clichés, and for being “a heavy-handed, remarkably old fashioned film.” One *New York Times* reviewer held nothing back, calling the flic “so stupid, so rotten and false in every detail....It is vile and insane’.” Despite the terrible reviews, *The Green Berets* managed to pull in enough John Wayne fans, and presumably Vietnam War supporters, to make a tidy profit at the box office. But the emotional and mixed responses to the film were indicative of a powerful American myth under siege by events that, in the eyes of a growing number of observers, it could no longer explain or

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<sup>315</sup> Michael Wayne quoted in Ronald H. Carpenter, “America’s Tragic Metaphor,” 12.

justify.<sup>316</sup> As will be explained in the next chapter, *The Green Berets* “patriotic” pro-war stance ran against the grain of late 1960s cinema, an era of revisionist anti-Westerns that were aimed, in particular, at calling out the faltering American experience in Vietnam as a mistake or worse.

Despite mounting sentiment against the war in Hollywood and elsewhere, Lyndon Johnson stayed the course—driving home the same kinds of messages as those delivered by Colonel Kirby. The virtues of the American civilizer—offset by the “savagery” of the Vietcong in *The Green Berets* with their marauding murderers, rapists and torturers—also appeared in LBJ’s own speeches about the Vietnam conflict. Speaking at Johns Hopkins University on April 7, 1965, Johnson enthusiastically praised the heroic efforts of Americans in Southeast Asia but then his words took on an ominous tone. Vietnam, LBJ asserted, “is a war of unparalleled brutality. Simple farmers are the targets of assassination and kidnapping. Women and children are strangled in the night because their men are loyal to their government. And helpless villages are ravaged by sneak attacks.” Here, the President told his audience, was civilization and savagery going head to head, not in nineteenth century Texas or Arizona, but today on the frontiers of Southeast Asia.<sup>317</sup> Like the brave pioneers and farmer settlers said to have faced marauding Indians and outlaws in the frontier West, the “Ham Chunks” of the world now needed help from the U.S. Cavalry.

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<sup>316</sup> Roger Ebert’s “Review of *The Green Berets*” (June 26, 1968) appears online at RogerEbert.com (accessed 24 April 2012); Reneta Adler’s “Review of *The Green Berets*, dir. By John Wayne,” *New York Times* (June 20, 1968): 49:1 is quoted in Mark Cronlund Anderson, *Cowboy Imperialism and Hollywood Film* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007): 92.

<sup>317</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson: “Address at Johns Hopkins University: “Peace Without Conquest.”,” April 7, 1965. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=26877> (accessed March 2, 2012).

*The Green Berets* and LBJ's frontier fight descriptions are prime examples of the structure of a myth that was being projected onto an event, the War in Vietnam, in a manner which created an alternate version of the event than that which was sometimes portrayed on the television evening news. With the escalation of the war in 1965 and the increasing buildup of network journalists assigned to cover Vietnam, it became more difficult for ABC, CBS and NBC TV network reports to resist controversial news. As J. Fred MacDonald outlines in *Television and the Red Menace: The Video Road to Vietnam*, the Johnson White House and Pentagon worked aggressively to manage reporters...but with dwindling success. The most renowned early instance of controversy was triggered on August 5, 1965, with Morley Safer's report for the CBS Evening News that showed US Marines torching thatched huts at the village of Cam Ne with cigarette lighters. The image of old South Vietnamese running away while their American protectors destroyed their homes and meager possessions made for wrenching TV viewing. Safer's accompanying audio description only intensified the video impact. "Today's operation is the frustration of Vietnam in miniature," Safer observed. "To a Vietnamese peasant whose home means a lifetime of back-breaking labor, it will take more than presidential promises to convince him that we are on his side." Morley Safer's story revealed that the "white hat" American soldiers were behaving in ways which dramatically departed from the cowboy code: committing atrocities as bad as any "black hat" Communist atrocity. This sense of contradiction would only intensify with the passing of time and the mounting of reports describing the wanton killing of hundreds of Vietnamese civilians by American soldiers: most notoriously at My Lai in 1968. For America's frontier myth the great irony here lies in the fact that what was being reported is strikingly similar to what Frederick Jackson Turner had described in his frontier



thesis. For Turner and his contemporaries, the frontier had been a place where Americans on the edge of civilization and savagery had descended into the latter to overcome it and create a better society for the nation in the process. In Vietnam, however, the killing and atrocities on both sides only seemed to ramp up while, simultaneously, the false statements and corruption coming from the governments in Washington and Saigon intensified. After several years of fighting and escalations, the American commitment to the conflict in terms of lives, resources and time frame came to be perceived by a growing segment of the public as limitless.<sup>318</sup>

By 1967 LBJ was perplexed over the failure of the myth to deliver but remained determined to hold out for what he perceived as its promise of victory in the end. Journalist Hugh Sidey later recalled a distraught LBJ explaining that as the Vietnam situation deteriorated he could not simply cut and run in Southeast Asia, “insisting that he had gone into South Vietnam because, as at the Alamo, somebody had to get behind the log of those threatened people.” But while LBJ recalled the grim courage of the Texas patriots fighting the “double-dealing” Mexicans, he did not appear directly cognizant of the downside of this analogy: that the defenders of the Alamo were annihilated. Sidey himself thought the “lesson” of the Alamo “served us ill,” explaining to one interviewer in 1992 that on many evenings at the White House, he and others on the press corps would be talking to the President about Vietnam and that “after he had discussed all the theories and rejected all the criticism—it would boil down to Johnson saying, ‘Boys, this is just like the Alamo! I grew up forty miles from it. I always felt somebody should have helped those men in the Alamo! I’m going to Vietnam! I’m going

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<sup>318</sup> J. Fred MacDonald, *Television and the Red Menace: The Video Road to Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1985): 235-236.

to help those people in Vietnam. I'm not going to be the first president to lose a war!" The American myth of invincibility, another feature of the Frontier Myth, was clearly at work here in LBJ's mind. Johnson was unwilling to pull the United States out of the Vietnam War without a face-saving victory. No President during the Cold War wanted to be the one who dishonored the nation's supposed record of having gloriously won all its wars. In reality, these Presidents, from Johnson through Gerald Ford, should have either known their history better or been more honest about their nation's past. The War of 1812 was not an outright victory but at best a draw for the United States, as was the Korean Conflict—though the latter was officially the responsibility of the United Nations. To Sidey, LBJ's position was "hopeless" on the matter since he felt that he just could not violate that sense of history or sense of legacy that he had taken with him from Texas to the White House.<sup>319</sup>

Both in the United States and abroad LBJ's adherence to the Frontier Myth in shaping the substance of his policies, and efforts to shape his own frontier cowboy image, were near absolute. Further, the myth was not only present in Johnson's own thinking and actions, it had become so deeply embedded in and fundamentally supportive of the structures of American society and its sense of self-identity that the president and (at least initially) most of his contemporaries were prevented from seeing Vietnam for what it actually was. The War in Indochina was a profound historical event, deeply impacting on that region and the world and on its number one foreign protagonist, the United States. It was an ordeal that affected almost every American family and shaped the contours of American society and politics from the mid-1960s

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<sup>319</sup> Hugh Sidey, "A Question of Belief in Hanoi—and At Home," *Life* (October 10, 1969): 4; Hugh Sidey's "History and Presidents" presentation at the Miller Center, University of Virginia, June 30, 1992, reprinted in *Miller Center Imprimatur*, Vol. III, No. 1 (August 1992): 2.

onward. But the war could not be explained or interpreted within the existing context of the Frontier Myth paradigm: its failure to achieve a victory or to bring about the kinds of transformations that the myth had promised made the Vietnam event too much for the structure to subsume. As such, “The Nam” challenged and shook the foundation of the Frontier Myth to its core.

## VII.

### **From the Failed Event of Vietnam to the Trials of Jimmy Carter: The Frontier Myth in Recession**

The traditional Western at its peak celebrated mainstream American values and ideology—the American Dream. In the 1960s darkness struck national innocence—the cultural, political and sexual revolutions, Vietnam, Watergate, assassinations, etc. Westerns continued to be made, but they were revisionist and began to speak less to the mainstream audience. The positivist, transcendental, triumphalist tone was lost.

--Film scholar Jim Kitses, 2010

There was a governmental secrecy, to exclude the American people, to mislead them with false statements and sometimes outright lies....I don't think I would ever take on the same frame of mind that Nixon or Johnson did—lying, cheating, distorting the truth.

—Democratic Presidential Candidate Jimmy Carter in *Playboy* magazine interview, 1976<sup>320</sup>

Trouble came for LBJ when the bad guys, the Vietcong, refused to be defeated in the face of cowboy resolve and when black and white, good and bad were complicated by the controversial nightly news reports of the America's first television war, the rallies of the peace movement and the messages of the counter-culture—when the myth could not accommodate the event of the Vietnam War. By the final year of Johnson's Administration, American society itself had divided up between those who supported

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<sup>320</sup> Kitses quotation from *Gamepro* appears in Andrew Patrick Nelson, *Still in the Saddle: The Hollywood Western, 1969-1980* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015): 15; Robert Scheer, "Playboy Interview: Jimmy Carter—A Candid Conversation with the Democratic Candidate for President," *Playboy*, Vol. 23, No. 11 (November 1976): 70, 86.

the land war in Asia and those who backed protestors shouting such slogans as, “Hell no, we won’t go!” and “Hey, hey LBJ...how many kids did you kill today?!!” outside the gates of the White House. Vietnam was taking tens of thousands of American lives, costing the American taxpayer \$30 billion a year and, since 1965, causing the Administration to expend all of its energy, eloquence, prestige and Johnson’s patent “persuasiveness” on the war. Worse still, the Newark and Detroit race riots of 1967 were being brought under control by members of the same U.S. Marine and Army divisions that had also turned their weapons against the very cities that they had been defending in South Vietnam, creating what Richard Slotkin has identified as a bizarre inversion of policies. This inversion was captured in the phrase allegedly used by an American officer to explain why the South Vietnamese town of *Ben Tre* needed to be evacuated so that sections could be leveled by the US Army: “It became necessary to destroy the town to save it.” Vietnam was not the American Southwest or the Plains. The belief that America’s frontier myth traditions and victories could be plugged into Southeast Asia came to be viewed by millions of Americans as flawed policy: the events there and its spinoffs on the home front could no longer be explained by the Frontier Myth. A perplexed Lyndon Johnson felt the heat, confiding privately to Lady Bird: “I can’t get out. I can’t finish it with what I’ve got so what the hell can I do?”<sup>321</sup>

By 1968, events abroad were wreaking havoc with LBJ’s frontier myth inspired domestic programs as well. Critics pointed out that due to the enormous costs of

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<sup>321</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 535; this famous quotation from an unidentified US military officer was published by AP journalist Peter Barnett and appeared in the article: “Major Describes Move,” *New York Times* (February 8, 1968): A14. The *NYT* article also stated that: “He was talking about the decision by Allied commanders to bomb and shell the town regardless of civilian casualties, to rout the Vietcong.” The original quote was distorted in later publications into the better known phrase: “We had to destroy the village in order to save it”; LBJ quoted in Chester, “Lyndon Baines Johnson, an American ‘King Lear’,” 325.

Vietnam, the War on Poverty was being put on a back burner just at the time when enormous expectations had been aroused. What shocked Johnson and supporters of his programs most was that Great Society initiatives—along with the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act—had not even appeared to improve the levels of hope and good will in the inner cities. Instead many TV viewers were left with the impression that the Great Society was actually stoking the most violent and widespread riots of the twentieth century. Eventually the term itself had to be dropped by an Administration already known for tending toward verbal overkill.

Tragically, unlike the Great Society phrase, the term “frontier” was never dropped from LBJ’s list of favourite expressions. Though frustrated by the mounting crises and failures, Johnson stubbornly refused to see the limitations of the structures of the myth as a lens for understanding complicated foreign affairs and the events of the Vietnam War. Rather, in matters of foreign policy, Johnson frequently invoked the term “frontiers of freedom” to describe Americans facing down Communists, whether it be in Southeast Asia or Europe. LBJ’s press secretary from 1964-1966, George Reedy, was the one (and perhaps only) member of Johnson’s staff who did *not* care for the frequent application of the term “frontier” to the Administration’s policies and blamed its frequent use as one of the sources of long term trouble for his boss. “I didn’t like the term frontier,” he explained years later. The term “bothered me because I knew that this was going to get into the international realm....You know, in Europe frontier is a very, very unwholesome term, because that’s the way war starts, somebody crosses a frontier. The difficulty with it, it’s a word that gets a very warm reception in the United States because we think of it as settling the unknown and taming the untamed and that kind of thing, but in the world of discourse, it’s a very bad word to use. I wanted it knocked out

of his speeches altogether.” Reedy’s protests fell flat. In 1966, after spending many years working for Johnson, he took a leave of absence from the Administration over differences with his boss on Vietnam. Four years later George Reedy published an influential book, *The Twilight of the Presidency*, which took a critical view of the modern presidency—including its reliance on the frontier mentality—and the impact of war on the office. Johnson reportedly rejected his former staffer’s frank assessment and refused to speak with Reedy again. As Brian Dippie found in the case of the vanishing American myth, the frontier myth had caused certain policy decisions to be made despite the reality of events that did not fit the myth. Reedy was perceptive enough to identify, though in a very general sense, this overall inconsistency in America’s Vietnam policy, but LBJ and the majority of his advisors were not.<sup>322</sup>

As I have argued, the belief in a westering mission of the United States to spread democracy and its values around the globe led to a massive buildup of American forces in South Vietnam: peaking at well over a half million US troops in 1968. That same year, Americans had perhaps never before become so frustrated by both an unresolved crises at home and an unresolved war abroad. One national disaster seemed to follow another for the United States until by late spring, many Americans perceived that their nation was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. The lessons of the frontier myth and its association with America’s identity and destiny were about to be severely shaken by a plethora of events that could not be explained and seemed to challenge the myth at every turn. On January 31, 1968, the first day of the Vietnamese New Year (Tet),

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<sup>322</sup> Transcript, George Reedy Oral History Interview XI, 12/20/83, by Michael L. Gillette, Internet Copy, LBJ Library: 48-49. One other member of LBJ’s team who opposed the frontier “mission” in Vietnam was Undersecretary of State George Ball, who had argued forcefully but unsuccessfully against American military involvement in Vietnam since the Kennedy years. Like Reedy, Ball left the Administration in 1966.

communist forces launched an enormous, concerted attack on American strongholds throughout South Vietnam. Though militarily a failure for the North, what made the Tet Offensive so shocking to the TV-viewing public was the sight of communist forces in the heart of a supposedly secure Saigon setting off bombs, shooting down South Vietnamese officials and troops, and holding down fortified areas including, for a brief time, the grounds of the American Embassy. The invincibility of the United States and belief that it was an undefeated nation of benevolent conquerors was collapsing in front of millions on the evening news. Events were going very badly at home as well. In early April, Dr. Martin Luther King, the most influential leader of the Civil Rights movement, was shot and killed by James Earl Ray while standing on the balcony of a motel in Memphis. Two months later, Robert F. Kennedy, the Democratic candidate for President favoured most by those opposed to the war and by African-Americans, was shot and killed by another assassin. (Having just won the California Primary, RFK had told his supporters minutes before that: "I think we can end the division within the United States, the violence.") Then in August, at the National Democratic Convention in Chicago, there was chaos outside the convention hall as thousands of antiwar demonstrators moved toward the building and were met by half of the Chicago police force decked out in riot gear. Hundreds of protestors were injured in a "police riot" which attempted to disperse the crowds with tear gas and billy clubs. Aware that the violence was being televised to the nation, the demonstrators taunted Chicago's finest by chanting: "The whole world is watching."

American-style democracy—believed to be the most important product of the frontier experience—had long been envisioned as being able to solve any crisis but in 1968 the electoral process itself now appeared to be under assault. A Harris poll showed



that more than half of the country shared the view of third party candidate George Wallace and his “hardhats”, that “liberals, intellectuals and long hairs have run the country for too long.” Certainly the belief that South Vietnam could emulate American democracy now seemed an emptier hope than ever. If anything, the reverse seemed to be happening with American riots, conspiracies, and assassinations mimicking the vast corruption that had long been associated with the regime in Saigon.<sup>323</sup>



**Figure 7.1: By the spring of 1968, even “The Spirit of TR” offers little comfort to LBJ. The Pueblo Incident, the capture of an US Navy ship and crew by North**

<sup>323</sup> George Wallace quotation and Harris poll results described in William E. Leuchtenburg, *A Troubled Feast: American Society Since 1945* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1983): 211.

**Korea in January, added more insult to American injuries overseas. Almost a year later, the American crew was forced to write a false confession to secure their release.** (Ralph Vinson, *New Orleans States-Item*, 1968. Courtesy of *The Times-Picayune/Nola.com*) <sup>324</sup>

Even *before* the two assassinations and chaos in Chicago, the division within the country which had challenged the prerogative of its cowboy leader to decide on his own what was in America's best interests, led to Lyndon Johnson's decision not to seek re-election. On March 31, 1968 he surprised the nation in a televised address by stating that: "I shall not seek, and will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President." After a brutal year for the Democrats and the nation, his Vice President, Hubert Humphrey, would eventually secure the Democratic Party nomination but not the presidency.<sup>325</sup>

### **LBJ and the Anti-Western: The Collapse and Transformation of the Myth**

As discussed, at the time LBJ emerged on the national scene in the late 1950s, Western movies, TV and novels were at the height of their popularity. As many as sixty million viewers per night watched the television westerns and, by January 1959, eight of the top ten programs were of that genre.<sup>326</sup> The American West had become a parable for American society and the challenges that pioneers and ranchers faced in the past inspired them to solve new cultural, social and political problems in the present and plan for the future. The national culture shifted westward and the political chameleon

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<sup>324</sup> This cartoon was located in the Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Special Files: Cartoon Collections, Box 7, File 25—Foreign Issues: United Nations, Europe, Pueblo Incident (North Korea), Latin America, Philippines. Ralph Vinson, *New Orleans States-Item*, 1968.

<sup>325</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson: "The President's Address to the Nation Announcing Steps To Limit the War in Vietnam and Reporting His Decision Not To Seek Reelection," March 31, 1968. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=28772> (accessed 27 April, 2012).

<sup>326</sup> MacDonald, *Television and the Red Menace*, 138-139.

LBJ shifted with it. In fact, LBJ became a kind of prototype as Americans turned to their mythic origins to provide the inspiration to face the complex tensions of the modern world. Tapping in to the nostalgia for an older America, LBJ's persona, clothing, cowboy talk and ranch represented that national heritage and became symbols of self-reliance, individualism, democracy, and the frontier age in an era when the nation treated these ideas without scorn or cynicism. Here was something authentic and tangible as opposed to the allegedly phony values of the Northeast as Johnson represented what the public had long viewed as the quintessential American experience. Initially this increased LBJ's power to persuade and to announce as authentic his aspirations and dreams for the nation.

But while Johnson was personally invested in and initially benefitted from a Frontier Myth so pervasive in popular culture, the nation had changed by the time he left office in January 1969—its' values moving away from the traditional version of the myth so crucial to LBJ's success and so inherent in his outlook. Now Western movies such as *Shane* (1953), *The Searchers* (1956) and *How the West Was Won* (1962) which had reflected the idea of a home place (like the LBJ Ranch) had been replaced by anti-Westerns—*The Good the Bad and the Ugly* (1966), *Hour of the Gun* (1967) and later *Little Big Man* (1970) and *Doc* (1971)—films in which the hero had become the antihero, an alienated individual with the need to wander. Anti-heroes of this intense, rapidly changing period were not just physically apart from civilization, they were hostile towards it. As Paul Newman told *Newsweek* in 1970, "The old heroes used to protect society from its enemies. Now it's society that's the enemy." In fact, outlaws such as Butch Cassidy and the actor Clint "The Man With No Name" Eastwood could commit crimes against society and still be popular in the hearts and minds of their audiences

because the faceless, corrupt and oppressive powers that be were “more worth fighting against than fighting for.” The Western anti-hero followed the Counterculture credo of “do your own thing” in opposition to the traditional Western story which, for many youth, now conjured up unpopular associations with the Vietnam War, race riots and the Chicago Democratic National Convention.<sup>327</sup>

In 1967, advertisements for *Hour of the Gun* asked potential movie-goers: “Wyatt Earp—Hero With a Badge or Cold-Blooded Killer?”<sup>328</sup> Posing such a question about an icon such as Earp a decade earlier would likely have been perceived as heretical by many Americans, but by the latter half of the 1960s Americans were sickened by the violence in their society and seeking new interpretive and explanatory narratives and structures to explain the current problems associated with the events of the Vietnam War and its related crises and to do so in a way that was consistent and interpretive of its historical origins. From 1966 onward the “anti-western” began to appear with greater frequency: dominated by greedy, alienated and violent individuals who mirrored the national division, cynicism, and alienation of the period. With the white and black hats reversed outlaws became the “good guys” while the image of lawmen like Wyatt Earp (popularized for the millions by Stuart Lake’s writings, Henry Fonda’s role in *My Darling Clementine*, and later by the milk-drinking hero of the early ‘60s TV series starring Hugh O’Brien) reached rock bottom. In the motion picture *Doc* in 1971, the ads left no question concerning Wyatt’s monstrous nature: “On a good day,” the movie-poster read, “he might pistol-whip a drunk, shoot an unarmed man, bribe a politician, and get paid off by an outlaw. He was a U.S. Marshal.” Harris Yulin portrayed Earp as a

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<sup>327</sup> Paul Newman quoted in Rushing, “The Rhetoric of the American Western Myth,” 21; some paraphrasing from *Ibid*, 22.

<sup>328</sup> Paul A. Hutton, “Celluloid Lawman: Wyatt Earp Goes to Hollywood,” *American West*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (May/June 1984): 61.

greedy, self-righteous and sadistic hypocrite. At the OK Corral, the Earp brothers and Doc Holliday (Stacey Keach) murder the victimized, long-haired Clantons with shotguns. Screenwriter Pete Hamill made his reasons clear for bursting Earp's bubble:

I went to Vietnam in 1966, and it was evident to almost everyone except the military that the war was wrong, but that we were continuing to fight because of some peculiar notions of national macho pride, self-righteousness and the missionary spirit. I started to realize that within Lyndon Johnson there was a Western unspooling. In that western the world was broken down into White Hats and Black Hats. Indochina was Dodge City, and the Americans were some collective version of Wyatt Earp.<sup>329</sup>



**Figure 7.2:** In this *it's-all-an-illusion* episode of *Star Trek*, Captain Kirk and his Space Cowboys engage in a showdown at the OK Corral against yet another anti-

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<sup>329</sup> *Ibid*, 65; *Ibid*.

**hero version of the “hated” Earp Gang: all stone faced and rotten. *Spectre of the Gun* was filmed in May of 1968—the month between the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy.** (© Paramount Pictures and CBS. Reproduced under the Fair Dealing [educational purposes] provision of the Canadian Copyright Act)

Of all the anti-hero Western directors, Sergio Leone was the most prolific. The Italian director’s tales deliberately replaced the genre’s code of honour with a counter-ideology of double-dealing and self-interest. Using low angle camera effects, extreme longshots and composition in depth contrasted with extreme close-ups, ridiculously long showdowns, odd-looking secondary characters, and the isolated sounds of single instruments (such as a piccolo or human whistling), Leone’s radical style kept audiences off balance by making a familiar genre bizarre. Above all else, his Spaghetti Westerns were indifferent to the law and to the idea of the civilizing mission behind settlement. Instead of “a man’s got to do...” the protagonist in *A Fist Full of Dynamite* sums up most of Leone’s people when he tells us: “I don’t want to be a hero—I just want the money.”<sup>330</sup> It is a West without progress and where everyone is, to varying degrees, corrupt. The towns in *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly* (1966) and the Dollars films<sup>331</sup> are noticeably void of women, the law, religion and culture. Filmed in the mountains and prairies of Almeria, Spain, the dusty and dirty environment represents a landscape of death where savagery and greed can flower. Indians are absent from Leone’s world: there is no conflict between savagery and civilization and no progress. And the characters are as empty as the landscape. The director’s choice of Eastwood (from TV’s “Rawhide” series) in his “Man With No Name” trilogy—as the cynical, minimalist anti-

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<sup>330</sup> *A Fistful of Dynamite* (1971), United Artists, Dir: Sergio Leone.

<sup>331</sup> *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), *For a Few Dollars More* (1965), and *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966), United Artists, Dir: Sergio Leone.

hero—ushered in an anti-Western avalanche. Jim Kitses writes that “as if to correct John Ford, Leone’s characters, images and action all seem to assert, ‘this is what the world is really like.’”<sup>332</sup>

Leone’s West with its over the top showdowns and high death counts set the stage for the even bloodier, extreme violence of Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch* (1969)<sup>333</sup> a few years later. In direct contrast to *The Magnificent Seven* of the early Sixties, the Bunch is without purpose: their battle cry of “Let’s go,” is pointless since they have nowhere to go. As Paul Monaco observes, most critics see the story’s depiction of the US cavalry’s intrusion in the Mexican Revolution as a parable for American military intervention in Vietnam.<sup>334</sup> Through scenes of ceaseless, intense, graphic violence with explosive “squibs” simulating bullets striking victims, Peckinpah shows us that men can be animals, that evil exists, and that America’s posture around the globe, its power and interference, is in large part derived from that evil. The film’s final killing scene underscores this point: lasting nearly half an hour it appears that the Bunch destroys the entire Mexican army. The Leone films and the Bunch in particular, mark the end of the classical western as the frontier becomes a place without progress: a brutish, vast cemetery. Kitses observes that “the *Wild Bunch* represents a way of life, a style of action, a technology with no vision, no values, no goals.”<sup>335</sup> According to film critic Robin Wood, the Western’s central concern of the growth of civilization, progress and spread of democracy had been put down. American civilization was a wasteland. As we shall

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<sup>332</sup> Kitses, *Horizon’s West*, 270.

<sup>333</sup> *The Wild Bunch* (1969), Warner Brothers, Dir: Sam Peckinpah.

<sup>334</sup> Monaco, *History of the American Cinema: The Sixties, 1960-1969*, 181.

<sup>335</sup> Kitses, *Horizons West*, 218.

see, in the 1970s, the terms of the classical western would go a step further and be fully *reversed*.<sup>336</sup>

Now the significance of the Western and Frontier Myth was changing as a result of a growing movement to expose the longstanding myth for what the counter culture and anti-war protests thought it was: a violent cultural tradition based on self-interest, greed, and false depictions of good versus evil—not one based on morality or truth—and one which was now serving destructive ends. The traditional Western myths were a reflection of ideas that had moved off of the national stage. By the end of the turbulent Sixties, Johnson’s version of the Frontier Myth had become an anachronism and, for many, a dangerous one at that.

### ***The End of the Trail for Cowboy Johnson***

LBJ had been elected in 1964 with the largest percentage of the popular vote in US history and his approval rating in early 1965 was over 70%. Within two years, though, this mandate evaporated. As early as the summer of 1965, US cities exploded with race riots. A series of long, hot summers in the years that followed were rife with street violence, war protests and assassinations that shook the positive attitude of the country and caused some members of the public who were already lukewarm toward Civil Rights and the Vietnam War to turn away from them both. By January 1967, *Newsweek* reported that praise of Johnson as a man who “gets things done” had dropped to just one third of what it had been two years earlier, while the number Americans who identified LBJ as “clever as a fox,” a “power grabber” and a “conniver” had tripled from the year before. In the fall of 1967, a majority of Democrats, 51 to 37 percent, preferred

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<sup>336</sup> Robin Wood, “Man(n) of the West(ern),” *Cineaction*, No. 46 (June 1998): 27.



John Kennedy's younger brother Robert over LBJ to lead their ticket in the next presidential election. During the first three years of his Presidency, Cowboy Johnson had been the most admired man in the country but the warm relationship with the American public and with foreign nations did not last. Now it seemed, almost everyone wanted LBJ to hit the trail. By March 1968, just 36 percent of Americans supported his handling of the presidency while more than half disapproved. Much of this decline related directly to US military involvement in Vietnam as the public grew more unfavourable toward LBJ's Vietnam policies than toward his policies in general. A study of polling data from August 1965 to March 1968 demonstrates that LBJ was caught in a kind of political quicksand so that each time he made a move to pull himself out, he might slow things down, but did not prevent his continual sinking. Consensus in 1964 had gradually been replaced by open conflict four years later and an outright rejection of the symbolism and values that Frontier Johnson was viewed as representing. By August 1968, the Tet offensive, *Pueblo* crisis, assassination of Martin Luther King (and possibly RFK as well), and mayhem at the Democratic National Convention all contributed to his lowest approval rating during his presidential years: just 35 percent. Johnson's steady reliance on the frontier myth had backfired as events caused its old tenets to be, for a time, rejected. Americans questioned their own involvement in a foreign land and their own self-assessment of superiority; less confident than before, many gradually began a new quest for a sense of national purpose but this would not come before more trials and tribulations in the decade which followed.<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> George H. Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1935-1971, Vol. 3, 1959-1971* (New York: Random House, 1972): 1222, 2083, 2100, 2113. For more detailed poll numbers see George L. Grice, *'We Are a People of Peace, But...': A Rhetorical Study of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Statements on US Military Involvement in Vietnam* (PhD thesis, University of Texas, 1976): 1, 10, 75, 76; "Quicksand" study appears in *Ibid*, 76-77; and the *Newsweek* characterizations are described in Louis Harris, "State of the

Historian Paul Conkin writes that “In his five years as president, Johnson moved from brilliant early success and from intense but fulfilling engagement to galling frustration, a sense of failure, and then to a characteristic withdrawal.” The Frontier Myth and related Cold War rhetoric of America’s duties in the world were so pervasive and accepted, it would be difficult to blame Johnson or most of his speech-writers too much for not seeing where the rhetoric was ultimately leading them. Most of the nation had bought fully into the notion of an American duty to extend its superior civilization throughout the world, to “go west” as the pioneers had done. The Western seemed to embody the psychology of the East-West struggle and had offered clear answers to complex questions and a paradigm of dedication to purpose. But in the context of Southeast Asia the American experience was something altogether different than had been experienced on the frontier. The guidance of the myth no longer provided the answers needed to deal with the complex events that confronted and confounded an unraveling American nation.<sup>338</sup>

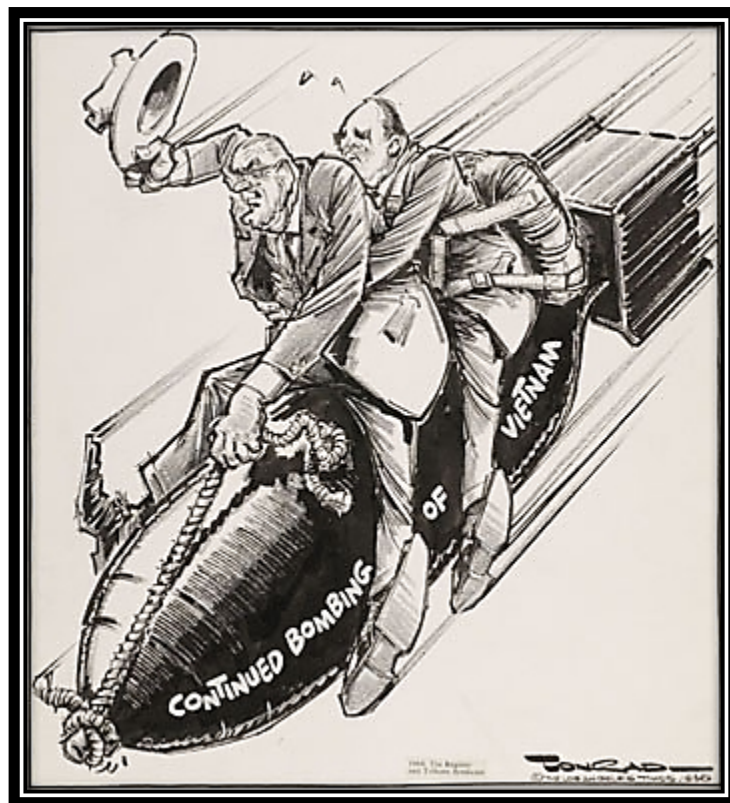
Lyndon Johnson worked hard at projecting himself as a “President of all the people,” excluding no group with the possible exception of the Goldwater Republicans. For Johnson, the domestic frontiers of the future encompassed people helping people especially through: federal government programs; protection of the environment at a time when the limits of land use and exploitation were becoming increasingly understood; freedom, racial equality and the promotion of the democratic process; and an overall a determination to make things better for future generations. “The woman I really loved, the Great Society,” said Johnson, represented “all my hopes, and all my

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LBJ Image,” *Newsweek* (January 9, 1967): 19; William C. Spragens, ed. *Popular Images of American Presidents* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988): 485.

<sup>338</sup> Conkin, *Big Daddy from the Pedernales*, 173.

dreams.” For LBJ, the Frontier Myth encompassed and represented these progressive, forward-thinking programs that he believed in and attempted to champion. But they also defined the parameters in which Johnson, through his vision of the frontier experience, was able to move. Perhaps most important of all, LBJ’s great passion for winning in Vietnam and in Congress seemed to cloud his understanding that passing legislation on its own does not always fix international or national problems and that government resources were not the “bonanza” that he had perceived.<sup>339</sup>



**Figure 7.3: “We’re Gonna’ Make History, Hubert!!”** By 1968, LBJ’s earlier optimistic cowboy-isms had been replaced with a much darker image. Here mad LBJ, and his frightened sidekick Hubert Humphrey, are depicted as *Dr. Strangelove’s* Major T.J. “King” Kong (Slim Pickens) rodeo riding a bomb to its detonation. (Paul

<sup>339</sup> Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976): 263.

Edward W. Chester's evaluation of LBJ's newspaper obituaries in *Presidential Studies Quarterly* reveals the mindset of the nation at the time of Johnson's death in January 1973. The only headline that appeared repeatedly atop the obituaries was the word "tragedy." The home paper of the Kennedy clan, the Massachusetts *Standard-Times* in Hyannis summed up the LBJ legacy for many of the editorialists: "Bitter irony lies in the fate of Lyndon Baines Johnson, a President who could have been among the greatest ever in this country, but who left office in 1969, reviled and repudiated by millions." For most of these obituary writers, the former President's "guns and butter" efforts to conduct the Vietnam War and Great Society at the same time and its resulting inflationary spiral were viewed as disastrous. The Baltimore *Evening Sun* raised a key observation, that the American failure to get a win in Vietnam destroyed "an oversimplified American notion of national invincibility"—a staple ingredient of the Frontier Myth. And Johnson's credibility gap loomed heavy with the Hyannis *Standard-Times* critic determining that "in the end, he took America into the Vietnam War by trickery and stealth and deceit." Immediately following Johnson's death Vietnam appeared as if it were the *only* foreign policy issue that mattered; even commentators who highly commended Johnson for his impressive program of domestic reform always added on the condition that it had been tarnished by the Vietnam albatross. Lyndon Johnson's adherence to and projection of the older version of the Frontier Myth which had done so much to facilitate his rise to the Presidency would, in the end, be closely tied to the inability of this same paradigm to accommodate the Asian War. A political and ideological crisis of such intensity as that experienced in 1967-1968 impacted on all

areas of American politics, cultural life and expression by challenging the fundamental belief that the nation's presidents, political leaders and institutions were on the whole reliable and worthy of the public's trust. Upon LBJ's passing, cartoonist Dan Morgan depicted "The End of the Trail," using James Earle Fraser's 1915 sculpture as a model for the Vanishing American—only this time it was Cowboy Johnson mounted and slumping on a horse instead of an American Indian. More broadly, the symbolism might also be taken to represent the "doomed fate" of the liberal nationalist version of the Frontier Myth.<sup>340</sup>

### **The Liberal Frontier Myth Fails the Test**

In the eyes of the American public, the Frontier Myth—with which LBJ had so closely associated himself—had failed the nation by proving woefully inadequate to accommodate the war or to accomplish what the public had anticipated at home.<sup>341</sup> The myth could not absorb hundreds of Americans dying each week in a war far away that was so poorly understood. As historian D.W. Brogan explained in 1967: "The desire to be right as well as victorious is deeply embedded in the American psyche." A connection between right and victory and, conversely, that to be defeated is to be wrong, clearly existed as a major ingredient of the Frontier Myth. And this time it appeared to many that the nationalist liberal version practiced by LBJ (and inherited in many respects from Theodore Roosevelt) failed the test. Popular culture's frontier tradition promised

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<sup>340</sup> Chester, "Lyndon Baines Johnson, an American 'King Lear'," 319, 320, 324, 325; Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Special Files: Cartoon Collection, Box 9, File 36—Funeral. Dan Morgan, *Kilgore News Herald* (TX), 1973.

<sup>341</sup> Though perplexed and frustrated, LBJ for his part, was never able to come to terms with the event-structure dichotomy. Instead, Johnson almost certainly believed that some Americans had betrayed the myth when thousands rioted in the milieu of forward-looking Great Society programs designed to help them and protested against a war that he believed was part of America's national mission. Johnson remained defiant until his death in 1973, telling Doris Kearns and the LBJ Library Director that he believed history would vindicate his decisions as President.

success in battling savage Indians and building successful enterprises from ranches and farms to commerce and industry. But the inescapable fact of Vietnam was that America did not win. Victory eluded the superpower, thereby undermining national confidence in the classic story of the frontiersman/cowboy vs. Indian confrontation. To make matters worse, the public watched with horror at home as soldiers drawn from US units sent to Vietnam turned their guns against the same inner city Americans that Johnson's Great Society programs had been created to uplift. And with multiple assassinations and demonstrations, the system of American democracy itself seemed under assault. Journalist Saul Pett wrote in 1970 that "America is no longer immune to history...no longer infinite in space or resources or hope. There is no next valley or virgin forest to tread." The gloomy side of the Frontier Myth that Turner had warned about after the closing of the frontier now appeared to emerge full-blown and President Lyndon Baines Johnson and his "failed" philosophies, for many conservatives, independents, and liberals alike, were to blame. Cowboy Johnson not only botched his "two" wars he threatened a sacred feature of the national Frontier Myth: the belief that America was the favoured nation.<sup>342</sup>

In an image-conscious political culture, political figures had become closely likened with icons—one of whom was Lyndon Johnson. Throughout the late 1960s and in the decades which followed, LBJ stood as the central figure against which conservatives, and even some Democrats, would define their own political beliefs. With forces spiraling out of control by 1967-1968, Johnson came to personify the perceived failures of cowboy liberalism in the 1960s. His inability to maintain control over his

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<sup>342</sup> D.W. Brogan quoted in Robert Jewett *The Captain America Complex: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973): 215; Pett quoted in Christopher Le Coney and Zoe Trodd, "Reagan's Rainbow Rodeos: Queer Challenges to the Cowboy Dreams of Eighties America," *Canadian Review of American Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (2009): 165.

image was painfully evident by the end of his presidency. Though the frontier myth, which transcended LBJ himself, would survive as a master explanation for the nation's destiny and as a constant in American thinking—it could not endure in the same form that it had for much of the twentieth century. A new cycle of events set in motion by the Vietnam experience, in particular, would now redefine the myth's parameters over the course of the 1970s decade.

From the late 1960s through 1980, the perceived meanings of the Frontier Myth and of what it meant to be a liberal and a conservative changed. As political scientist Bruce Miroff contends in his recent study, *The Liberals' Moment*, the political earthquake of 1968 “marked the fatal rupture that divided the Democratic coalition.” That year, Republican Richard Nixon would be elected and, though interrupted by Watergate, would carry the mantle of conservative ascendance that would take full hold under the Reagan Revolution and bring about a reconstructed Frontier Myth.<sup>343</sup>

### **Frontier Myth in Remission**

Following one of the most remarkable comebacks in American political history, the “Republican Phoenix” Richard Milhous Nixon, took over the presidential office in January 1969 after defeating Hubert Humphrey at the ballot box in November. During his five years in office, RN rarely attempted to cash in on the now receded Frontier/Western Myth. Though he was from the Southern California, the Far West, Nixon promoted much more the persona of a generic national politician rather than one with Western attributes. Strangely though, his foreign relations advisor and later Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, did understand himself as a kind of cow man with

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<sup>343</sup> Miroff, *The Liberals' Moment*, 2.

portfolio. Dr. Kissinger envisioned his own diplomatic technique as that of the heroic loner who comes to the rescue. In 1972, he boasted to Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci that:

I've always acted alone. Americans like that immensely. Americans like the cowboy who leads the wagon train by riding ahead alone on his horse, the cowboy who rides all alone into the town, the village, with his horse and nothing else. Maybe even without a pistol, since he doesn't shoot. He acts, that's all, by being in the right place at the right time. In short, a Western.<sup>344</sup>

Thankfully, Kissinger did not buy a ranch.

Throughout the twentieth century, popular culture depicted Western heroes like Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, Wyatt Earp and Buffalo Bill as having achieved brave triumphs over their adversaries with tales of their amazing toughness and marksmanship. Henry Nash Smith had declared them all “fixtures of American mythology.” Johnson had proudly displayed the cowboy art of Frederic Remington and Charlie Russell in the White House; artists that the Goetzmanns compare to Walt Disney for “giving birth to such vital and unforgettable characters.” Americans used these myths to bolster and intensify their values as a people and a nation. In a press conference in 1970, Richard Nixon expressed his disdain for the new anti-hero types who “tend [to] glorify and to make heroes out of those who engage in criminal activities.” Rather, he thought that Charles Manson’s gruesome cult-murder case and the breakdown of law and order could be straightened out by taking the Duke’s performance in *Chisum* as a model. But Westerns of any kind, including anti-Westerns, were becoming increasingly rare by 1971. The “heroic” Western myth and symbolism

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<sup>344</sup> Henry Kissinger quoted in J. Fred MacDonald, *Who Shot the Sheriff? The Rise and Fall of the Television Western* (New York: Praeger, 1987): 3.



which informed the politics of the Lyndon Johnson years took a hiatus from the end of his Administration until 1980—having been submerged by Vietnam, race riots, and a deepening recession. Stock in the old Western myth seemed to reach a low point with the release of Mel Brooks' full-blown Western farce, *Blazing Saddles* in 1974: the same year that the lid was blown off of Nixon's Watergate scandal. Apart from these comedic deviations, gunfighter skills and violence were now being portrayed through urban Western characters like Clint Eastwood's Inspector "Dirty Harry" Callahan with his eight-inch barreled Smith & Wesson revolver. *Star Wars* (1977), meanwhile, took on several Western conventions, from the low-slung laser weapons holsters, to the black and white attire, to the shoot-out scene with individualist and maverick Han Solo in the intergalactic saloon. Luke Skywalker grows up on a ranch under a rim rock and the film's characters live on the edge between civilization and wilderness. Though it contained little about racial inclusiveness, the rescue narrative was quite clearly inspired by *The Searchers*. But George Lucas' blockbuster deliberately disguised Western conventions in an outer space setting. *Outland* (1981) relocated the classic *High Noon* plot in outer space with none other than Sean "Mr. Bond" Connery replacing Gary Cooper as a space marshal who rode in from nowhere. Like Cooper, Connery ends up facing the bad guys alone as the miners he's come to help cower on the sidelines. If the traditional Frontier/Western heroes and settings themselves had been tainted and were now out of fashion, audiences were at least reassured that its essential themes live on through these overlapping police-Western, science fiction-Western genres that such reincarnated frontiersmen provided a direct relationship between the past and the future.<sup>345</sup>

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<sup>345</sup> Goetzmann and Goetzmann, *The West of the Imagination*, 283; Richard Nixon: "Remarks to

Apart from comedies that mocked the Frontier Myth, overt Westerns of the post-Johnson era were typically about failure and catastrophe. Film scholar Robin Wood identifies the two *truly* revisionist Westerns as *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971) and *Heaven's Gate* (1980)<sup>346</sup>, both of which in different ways represent utter rejections of the 'progress' of Americanism by completely reversing the conventions of the classic Western.<sup>347</sup> Director Robert Altman, having just come off of directing the film version of *M\*A\*S\*H* (1970), referred to his revisionist *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* as an "anti-western film" because it subverted so many Western codes, including: male dominance, the heroic standoff, and John Ford's rationale of domesticity and the Euro-family on the land. John McCabe (Warren Beatty) and Mrs. Miller (Julie Christie) are introduced to their audience in a ballad about drug dealers (McCabe), addicts (Miller), and disheveled prostitutes. At the film's close, McCabe dies in a snowdrift after being wounded by the same corrupt and violent company that had wanted to buy him out. McCabe had been encouraged to build something of worth and promote the values of freedom and entrepreneurship in the wilderness but instead dies trying only after reaching the realization that the pious platitudes were fake. Here Altman directly overturns the idea of the "winning of the West" and its alleged basis in cultural superiority and the civilizing of the frontier. McCabe was neither a liberal nor a conservative application of the Frontier Myth: it was an outright rejection.

Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate*, meanwhile, plays down the heroic role of the individual and any sense of hierarchy in society. The film features evil capitalists picking

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Newsmen in Denver, Colorado," August 3, 1970. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=2608> (accessed 13 July 2011).

<sup>346</sup> *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), Warner Brothers, Dir: Robert Altman; and *Heaven's Gate* (1980), United Artists, Dir: Michael Cimino.

<sup>347</sup> Wood, "Man(n) of the West(ern), 27.

on immigrants in Wyoming with a final massacre that is hideously effective in applying post-Vietnam War cruelty in a Western setting. Here when the U.S. cavalry rides to the rescue, it is on the wrong side. Like *McCabe*, *Heaven's Gate* is a film of failure and catastrophe that Wood writes might have been aptly called "*The Death of a Nation*."<sup>348</sup> Though a highly innovative Western, *Heaven's Gate* is perhaps most famous for its extravagant costs and failure at the box office, which led to the collapse of United Artists. The film, arguably, might have done better with American audiences had it come out a few years earlier but by 1980 there was a movement in the U.S. toward conservatism and more "patriotic" films that would emerge during the Reagan years.

Lyndon Johnson's demise marked the end of an era of liberal, Democratic Party supremacy but it was presidential candidate George McGovern's 1972 campaign that shifted power among Democrats from one that dominated urban, blue-collar voters to a party dominated by suburban, college-educated activists. The South Dakota Senator's campaign also interested new cultural forces, including women's and gay rights, dropped the Party's Cold War past and oriented itself against the Vietnam War, American military buildups, and overseas interventions. Nixon first blasted the post-Johnson Democrats (specifically his opponent George McGovern) for promoting "the three A's—acid, amnesty and abortion." And conservatives would continue to apply this label to liberal Democrats through the 1980s and beyond. As Bruce Miroff asserts in his close examination of the McGovern Campaign and its legacy, McGovern's massive defeat at the hands of Nixon's "Silent Majority" in 1972 placed a kind of stigma on the left wing of the Democratic Party that has become a rationale for the party's drift to the

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<sup>348</sup> Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan...And Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003): 282.

center ever since. Miroff also contends, correctly in my view, that while Democrats continued to champion “policies favorable to working class interests” they “fell short, most of the time, in touching working-class hearts.” In the realm of presidential politics this would have significant implications for the changing Frontier Myth.<sup>349</sup>

For a time during the 1970s—in its liberal, conservative and more radical forms—the myth seemed to just hang there in a state of limbo. In country music, the Statler Brothers’ song “Whatever Happened to Randolph Scott?” released in 1974, featured a chorus that both inquired into and lamented the disappearance of the white hat, code abiding heroes of Westerns past:

Whatever happened to Randolph Scott,  
riding the trail alone?  
Whatever happened to Gene and Tex  
and Roy and Rex? The Durango Kid?  
Whatever happened to Randolph Scott,  
his horse plain as can be?  
Whatever happened to Randolph Scott,  
has happened to the rest of me.<sup>350</sup>

The last line is apparently an indication of a direct connection between the frontier Western story and American society; here the suggestion appears to be that the absence of genuine cowboy heroes reflects a broader decline in society (reminiscent of Simon and Garfunkel’s baseball star lament in their 1968 hit, *Mrs. Robinson*: “Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio? Our nation turns its lonely eyes to you”). The departure of Scott speaks of something having “happened” to everyone else as well. And nowhere did this appear more evident than at the level of the American presidency.

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<sup>349</sup> Miroff, *The Liberals’ Moment*, 2; *Ibid*, 3; *Ibid* 300.

<sup>350</sup> The Statler Brothers, “Whatever Happened to Randolph Scott,” Album: *Carry Me Back*, Mercury Records (1973).

During the remainder of the 1970s, Americans' ability to respond to major issues impacting the nation was undermined by what was perceived as a crisis in leadership as three successive presidents—Nixon, Ford and Carter—were rejected by the American public. Richard Nixon's overwhelming victory in 1972 quickly went sour and, in less than two years, he was forced into resignation over the Watergate Scandal. Gerald Ford's pardoning of Nixon, and his perceived failure to respond effectively to the OPEC oil boycott, bankruptcy in New York City, and in Vietnam, where Saigon fell in 1975, undermined his own presidential image and contributed to his defeat in 1976. Then a kind of aberration from the conservative trend occurred when Democratic candidate Jimmy Carter was elected to the presidency as an outsider in 1976. Unfortunately for the former Georgia Governor, he had inherited the ruined ideology of liberal progressivism which, if not dead, was at best in intensive care.

### **The Trials of Jimmy Carter**

James Earl "Jimmy" Carter of Plains, Georgia was not a western cowboy but a Southern peanut farmer. While a fellow Democrat, Carter did little to rehabilitate the reputation of Lyndon Johnson when he ran for President against Gerald Ford in 1976. In fact, Carter treated Johnson as an anathema and rarely even mentioned his name. One notable exception came in Carter's highly publicized interview with *Playboy* Magazine published just days before the 1976 Presidential Election. The White House hopeful told interviewer Robert Scheer that, though he had encouraged his son, Jack Carter, to enter the US Navy and Jack saw action in Southeast Asia: "there was an accepted feeling by me...that we ought not to be there, that we should simply never have gotten involved, we ought to get out." When asked who was responsible, Carter

conceded: “I guess if there was one President who made the most determined effort, conceivably, to end the war by massive force, it was certainly Johnson.” Conscious of the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate mood in the country, Carter then ramped up his criticism: “There was government secrecy, to exclude the American people, to mislead them with false statements and sometimes outright lies.” And in the highlighted last line of the article (located just a few ads before the magazine’s most popular feature, the centerfold of “Miss November”) Carter delivered the crushing blow: “I don’t think I would ever take on the same frame of mind that Nixon or Johnson did—lying, cheating, distorting the truth.”<sup>351</sup>

Anti-government sentiment and folksy-charm worked to Jimmy Carter’s advantage in the 1976 general election campaign as he worked hard to portray himself as the honest Washington outsider. Carter’s team managed to avoid having its candidate labeled as either liberal or a conservative for, by the nation’s Bicentennial year, this was perceived to be a losing game. On November 2, 1976, Carter won a narrow victory over President Gerald Ford but the big election story was the poor voter turnout. “Neither Ford nor Carter won as many votes as Mr. Nobody,” one reporter observed in making a connection to the fact that almost half of the nation’s eligible voters did not show up at the polling booths.<sup>352</sup>

If Carter was to improve the climate of American political culture, he had his work cut out for him. In the wake of defeat in Vietnam, the “credibility gap”, and Watergate—and with the frontier myth paradigm now in hiatus—Jimmy Carter attempted to use television to de-mystify what he viewed as a bloated and self-important office of the

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<sup>351</sup> Scheer, “Playboy Interview: Jimmy Carter...,” 70, 86.

<sup>352</sup> George Brown Tindall and David A. Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, Volume 2 (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999): 1595.

presidency. Carter abandoned Johnson's heavy-handedness and Nixon's imperial style. He conducted TV fireside chats in cardigan sweaters, carried his own luggage, made his own breakfast, and for a time even banned the playing of "Hail to the Chief." While this approach seemed to play well at first in the end, when the economy continued to flounder, it was perceived as resulting in a "diminutive presidency." Carter, in effect, created a milieu that undercut his own public image, seemed to undermine his own achievements, and reduced his own authority and legitimacy.<sup>353</sup>

On the heels of the defeat in Vietnam, events and circumstances which had disempowered the frontier myth and sent it into temporary remission only seemed to accelerate during the years of the Carter Administration. In terms of presidential decisions and actions Carter, like Ford before him, had inherited an almost insurmountable set of domestic and international problems when he took office: high unemployment, growing trade deficits, "stagflation" of inflation and slow growth, record-high energy prices, and dropping productivity. Carter was expected to fix all of these problems and the national spirit through political institutions and progressive policies in which many Americans had lost faith. Despite a variety of efforts the economic and international situation only worsened. Before long White House journalists began reporting on a series of embarrassing incidents involving Bert Lance and Carter's brother Billy (who had borrowed money from Colonel Khadafi of Libya to prop up the Carter peanut business) which served further to undercut his presidential image. The seizure of the American hostages in Iran, held for fourteen long months, seemed a metaphor for the Carter Administration and the nation's impotence.

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<sup>353</sup> *Newsweek* quoted in Leuchtenburg, *A Troubled Feast*, 277; Spragens, ed. *Popular Images of American Presidents*, 604.

“Television,” writes William C. Spragens, “reinforced his image as a vacillating, weak, and confused leader.”<sup>354</sup>

The can-do spirit of the now spent liberal version of the frontier myth reached a low point with the deflating events and circumstances of the late 1970s. In his 1980 State of the Union address, President Carter asked Americans to make sacrifices and talked about the United States as a nation of limits. Carter told viewers to turn down their thermostats, said that the nation needed to lower some of its loftier goals, that it was in the best interests of peace to accommodate the Soviets where possible. He quoted from Walter Lippmann who had once stated: “You took the good things for granted. Now you must earn them again....There is nothing for nothing any longer.” Jimmy Carter had found so much confusion in the country that he scolded his fellow Americans for committing the crime of “malaise.” The President’s sentiments, though perhaps well founded, were especially demoralizing in a country which had long defined itself in terms of growth; and it roused a fear which dated back to the close of the frontier. The Census Bureau’s declaration of the close of the Frontier in 1890 was perceived in ominous terms by some Americans. Turner had told them that the frontier had shaped and defined Americans—without any frontiers the nation ran the risk of becoming, well, un-American. LBJ had spoken of metaphorical frontiers in education, in the macro-frontier of space, and through the construction of hydroelectric projects. Now Carter—who seemed to personify the passing of the confident, liberal frontier myth of the TR and Johnson administrations—was telling the country that these metaphors were drying

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<sup>354</sup> *Ibid*, 604.



up too. None of this sat well with the American electorate and many preferred to blame Carter for this rather than themselves.<sup>355</sup>

In popular culture, the Ford and early Carter years had seen Americans embrace averageness. On TV, Archie Bunker's shabby living room, *Taxi's* garage, Jim Rockford's dilapidated trailer, and even the modest apartment of two childless working professionals Bob and Emily Hartley on *The Bob Newhart Show* all seemed to make class and status, and the pursuit of wealth, noticeably absent on many 1970s TV series. When their non-management colleagues hit the picket lines on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, Mary Richards and her boss Lou Grant felt a horrible discomfort in crossing the picket line. Wealth, status and "material success" received little attention on 1970s TV series. But then all this changed, and quickly.

The premier of *Dallas* in 1978 would before long bring about the demise of the blue-collar-to-middle-class characters of the Ford and Carter years. Instead J.R. and the Ewings made being filthy rich attractive and sexy. Gerald Ford had gone out of his way to make it known he spent his first days as President at his modest home driving to work and making toast for breakfast, while Jimmy Carter packed out his own belongings from Plains, Georgia, to the White House, wore sweaters when addressing the nation, took phone calls from ordinary citizens, and created what *Newsweek* called "corn bread-and-cardigan atmospherics."<sup>356</sup> All of this was to demonstrate that the in the post-LBJ and Nixon eras, these presidents were regular guys whose personas would bear no resemblance to an "Imperial Presidency." Not without some irony, however, by the end of the decade both Ford and Carter would be overshadowed by well-to-do movie star

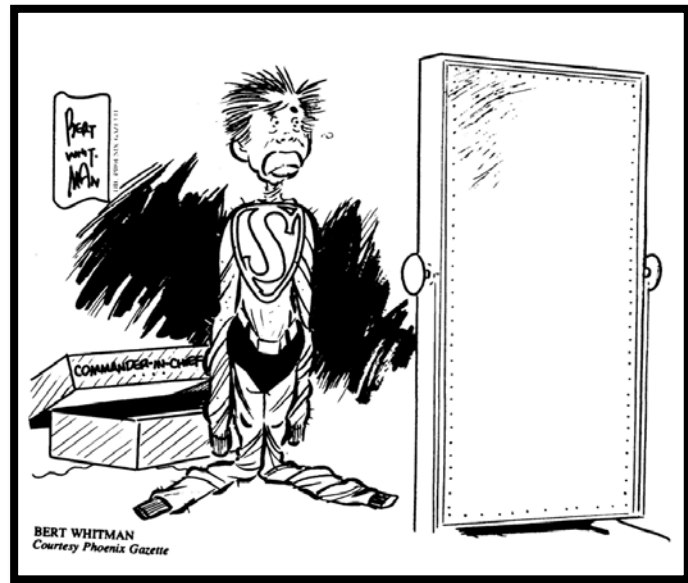
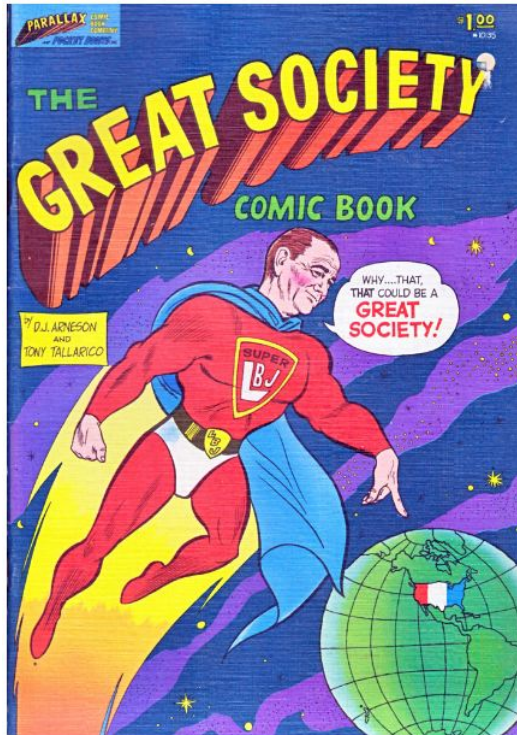
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<sup>355</sup> Jimmy Carter: "The State of the Union Address Delivered Before a Joint Session of the Congress," January 23, 1980. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=33079> (accessed February 29, 2012).

<sup>356</sup> Leuchtenburg, *A Troubled Feast*, 277.

Ronald Reagan of Beverly Hills, who seemed a lot more likely to be enjoying cocktails with the Ewings than visiting with *Good Times*' "J.J." Evans and his family at their inner-city apartment/housing project.

Though set in urban Texas, *Dallas*, the TV show, would tap into the nostalgic potential of the West from a different angle than that of previous decades. As the only weekly "Western" of the 1980s, its stories were not about building better communities out West, battling greedy cattle barons, or haves versus have nots as in *Heaven's Gate*—but focused instead on wealth and skullduggery at the Southfork Ranch. The show's main character, scheming oil tycoon JR Ewing (Larry Hagman), became a kind of worldwide symbol of America and its allegedly conservative roots out West. *Dallas*' smash success would set the stage for the glitz and excess of *Dynasty* and Robin Leach's *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. This change was a major departure from the past and seemed to parallel a major shift in the political culture of the nation and the Frontier Myth—one that intertwined with the declining image of President Jimmy Carter.



**Figures 7.4 and 7.5: The devolution of the Presidential “Superhero” from LBJ (1966) to Jimmy Carter (1980).** (Figure 7.4 by D.J. Arneson and Tony Tallerico, *The Great Society Comic Book*, Issue 1, New York, Parallax Comic Books, 1966. Figure 7.5 cartoon by Bert Whitman, *Phoenix Gazette*, 1980. Both images reproduced under the Fair Dealing [educational purposes] provision of the Canadian Copyright Act)

In 1980, Bert Whitman of the *Phoenix Gazette* drew an editorial cartoon of Jimmy Carter dressed in a Superman suit many times too big for him to fill (Figure 7.5). It was a far cry from the “can do” days of the Great Society (Figure 7.4). Michael DeSousa asserts that during the Iranian hostage crisis, President Carter was similarly portrayed by cartoonists and newspaper editors as just not up to the task of besting the Ayatollah Khomeini. The *Wall Street Journal* even pulled an old-LBJ stunt to denounce the Democratic President, belittling Carter for his “feminine spirit” and his unwillingness to “twist arms.” “[W]e watched how far this approach got him in the jungles of Washington and the world. So in a sense, we’ve already had a ‘woman president’: Jimmy Carter.” By

1980, Carter had for some become a kind of antithesis of the presidential image, a kind of anti-frontiersman/cowboy who just seemed incapable of getting the job done.<sup>357</sup>

In the summer of 1980, Carter received the lowest approval rating for a president ever recorded up until that time—21 percent. One week before the presidential election in November, the sympathetic *New York Times* acknowledged that Carter had made some excellent appointments, showed courage on the Panama Canal, and had developed a successful energy program; but its editors also wrote that “President Wobble...seemed to be all sail and no boat.” A Harris poll taken in 1980, listed all presidents since FDR and asked “Which President was least able to get things done?” Carter finished first, Gerald Ford second. A year before polls revealed that what the electorate now wanted was “strong leadership” but not a return to what were perceived as the “failed” visions of the 1960s. The ruined ideology of liberal progressivism had resulted in a temporary hiatus of the Frontier Myth. Now a growing number of Americans who were “getting mad as hell and not going to take it anymore” envisioned a national hero who could restore national pride. Circumstances were ripe for a resurrection of the Frontier Myth with a substantively different agenda and emphasis. The Republicans saw their opportunity and quickly pounced.<sup>358</sup>

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<sup>357</sup> Michael A. DeSousa, “Symbolic Action and Pretended Insight: The Ayatollah Khomeini in U.S. Editorial Cartoons.” In *Rhetorical Dimensions in the Media: A Critical Casebook* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 1984): 183; *WSJ* quoted in Le Coney and Trodd, “Reagan’s Rainbow Rodeos...,” 168.

<sup>358</sup> Leuchtenburg, *A Troubled Feast*, 280; *NYT* editorial quoted in *Ibid*; Harris poll results in Spragens, *Popular Images of American Presidents*, 604-605.

## VIII.

### **The Hinge: Ronald Reagan & the Conservative Resurgence of the Frontier Myth**

I've been looking forward to coming home to the Great American West. While Washington, as usual, seems paralyzed by handwringers, the people here are filled with...frontier spirit. You and your forebears tamed a wild frontier....So now load up the musket and help us conquer this wild growth and centralization of power which threatens all that we've created....We share the overriding philosophy that individual freedom, individual integrity, and individual ingenuity made us the greatest country the world has ever known....Together we'll make America great again.

—President Ronald Reagan, Cheyenne, Wyoming, 1982<sup>359</sup>

#### **Introduction**

Sometimes mythical narrative and social structures become so battered by unforeseen historical events that they collapse. Certainly this is what happened to the liberal frontier cowboy myth so prominent in LBJ's early presidency. Under the presidencies of Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, the frontier myth and associated ideology of liberal progressivism would together recede from the American mind and politics. But while the myth was out of sight it was not dead. Rather, it was simply too weakened by the events of the mid-to-late 60s to protect its own core features, and so became susceptible to being reformulated in a new shape at the hands of a new political collective who drew from it what suited their aims and in the process

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<sup>359</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at a Rally for Senator Malcolm Wallop of Wyoming in Cheyenne," March, 2, 1982. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1982/30282a.htm>> (accessed 13 July 2011).

gave it a new and conservative form. At the outset of the 1980s decade, many Americans longed for a mythic hero who could restore national pride. When the myth was resurrected in 1980, it would no longer be as a touchstone of liberal Presidents but instead as a key symbol of the conservative “Reagan Revolution.” Over a period of a dozen years, the Frontier Myth’s structure would undergo a greater climatic shift than during any transition period since the late nineteenth Century.

Walter R. Fisher has written that, in 1976, former actor and California Governor Reagan was defeated by Ford at the Republican Presidential Convention because he was perceived as “someone who ‘shoots from the hip’, a man of action”; but in 1980 Reagan was, arguably, victorious for the same reason.<sup>360</sup> The former editor of the *Texas Observer*, Jim Hightower, referred to Reagan as a “disgruntled maverick”: an iconic figure of the heroic frontiersman who the little guy could depend on in the fight against big bureaucracy and big government. Reagan would do this by encouraging individual initiative, self-reliance, freedom and independence from government. The former Governor’s own political themes appeared like something from an earlier time as he pledged to lead Americans back to their traditional and exceptional values, and rightful position as leader of the “free” world: an omnipotent righteous cause would replace good intentions. Ronald Reagan would become the presidential leader and symbol of the nation’s conservative, nostalgic drive to restore an imaginary vanished past.<sup>361</sup>

Picking up on some of the same themes initialized by Richard Nixon, the Republicans sought to frame the public image of Democratic liberalism as a party of war, lawlessness and weak-kneed policies. Conversely, Reagan came to personify the

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<sup>360</sup> Walter R. Fisher, “Romantic Democracy, Ronald Reagan, and Presidential Heroes,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Summer 1982): 299-310.

<sup>361</sup> Jim Hightower quoted in Sean P. Cunningham, *Cowboy Conservatism: Texas and the Rise of the Modern Right* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010): 174.

perceived strengths of modern conservatism: a philosophy touted as having the right prescription for defeating economic stagflation at home and standing up to the Soviet menace and other international “outlaws” abroad. A man in Wichita Falls, Texas, LBJ’s home state, wrote to Reagan that he and others were “sick, sick, sick and disenchanted with the whole picture in Washington. We want someone up there with the guts to buck the establishment, clean house and make a really honest effort to reinstate an old-fashioned honorable government for the people.”<sup>362</sup> Another voter from Brownwood, who only identified himself in his letter to the editor as “old Cowboy,” described the Lone Star state’s political attitude as follows: “Hell, most everybody around here calls themselves a Democrat, but that don’t mean they’re a bunch of crazy liberals.” Then he went into attack mode on the incumbent President. “Carter’s ruined our defense position,” he wrote. “He’s let some dinky little country push us around and kidnap our people. He’s sacrificed our farmers with his wheat embargo and ruined our economy while he runs giveaway programs....Maybe Reagan can turn things around.”<sup>363</sup> Views like these ones reflected a belief that Reagan was the antithesis of establishment politics. And cultural conservatives—including westerners, southerners and blue-collar workers—had increasingly come to view and denounce the national Democratic Party as a voice for special interests (an image once held by elite, “country club” Republicans), and racial and radical minorities. At the same time, the more that Jimmy Carter was associated with failure, the more failure was associated with liberalism, and liberalism associated with the Democratic Party: thus completing the circle. Reagan and his handlers were able to transform the vision of conservatism while at the same time

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<sup>362</sup> Correspondence from Wichita Falls voter to Reagan quoted in Cunningham, *Cowboy Conservatism*, 175.

<sup>363</sup> Letter from “Old Cowboy” to Reagan quoted in *Ibid*, 211.

negatively redefining liberalism as a failed philosophy. The Republican strategists' combined a variety of issues into one big, mass problem of alleged incompetence, big government and lack of moral leadership. In Theodore Roosevelt's day, the Frontier Myth had been deployed to combat monopolistic power and greedy corporations (on the big screen this had been well established in John Ford's classic *Stagecoach*)—the Federal Government was there to champion the rights of “regular” Americans. Now Reagan and company had seemingly turned this perception around, insisting that a bloated federal government and not corporate vested power was the biggest threat to the nation's frontier values and Americans' pioneering spirit. In so doing they managed to convince some swing voters who had never viewed the GOP as trustworthy and as only a friend of the rich that Reagan was on their side.<sup>364</sup>

Remarkably, many of Reagan's arguments would vary little if at all from those promoted by Barry Goldwater in 1964 but Reagan had a distinct advantage over his old mentor and friend that scholars that have not previously acknowledged: a revamped, conservative version of the Frontier Myth that he and his campaign staffers tapped into and perpetuated through its old-new platform and Reagan's own image as a Western cowboy. Marshall Sahlins and others examining the dynamics between structure and event provide us with theoretical and interpretive tools which can assist us in interpreting this change. In the anxiety-ridden era spanning from the late LBJ to Carter periods, an avalanche of perceived national failures caused the entire Frontier Myth to shift sharply to the right and take on a new form from which Reagan and his supporters stood to benefit from the most.

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<sup>364</sup> *Ibid*, 5.



Ronald Reagan had “the look” of a “Cowboy conservative.” Fisher observed that many Americans found their quest for a hero in the transplanted mid-westerner who now seemed even more the California-far westerner than folks who were born there (including Nixon):

He aroused a consciousness not of the stevedore, the athlete, or the truck driver, but the quintessential hero of the West—the town marshal. Accenting this image were his origins, the West (California—the last frontier); his penchant for western garb, his ranch, his pastime of riding horses, and several of his film and television roles, and his physical appearance: tall, lank, and rugged. Like the savior of the West, he exuded honesty and sincerity, innocence, optimism, and certainty.

The Reagan image was carefully crafted in accordance with many of the same frontier qualities espoused by Turner. Reagan had supreme confidence and self-reliance in his economic theories and (*unlike* the grim Goldwater of 1964) supreme optimism for the country, was resilient and virile, and constantly describes his proposed policies and “initiatives” in a kind of spirit of adventure. And Reagan was a kind of politician-frontiersman who would directly challenge what was once again perceived as the corrupting and phony complexity of Eastern institutions. LBJ, the promoter of the public good, would be replaced by Ronald Reagan the deregulator and protector of capitalist freedom so sought after by big business. For Reaganites, promoting individualism did not involve protection of one’s rights and welfare within society but instead meant independence *from* government controls.<sup>365</sup>

Middle class conservative Americans, in particular, welcomed Reagan’s self-assurance, critique of the Washington establishment, and promise of rejuvenation. Americans were being told they could regain their youth by electing the oldest President

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<sup>365</sup> Fisher, “Romantic Democracy,” 302.

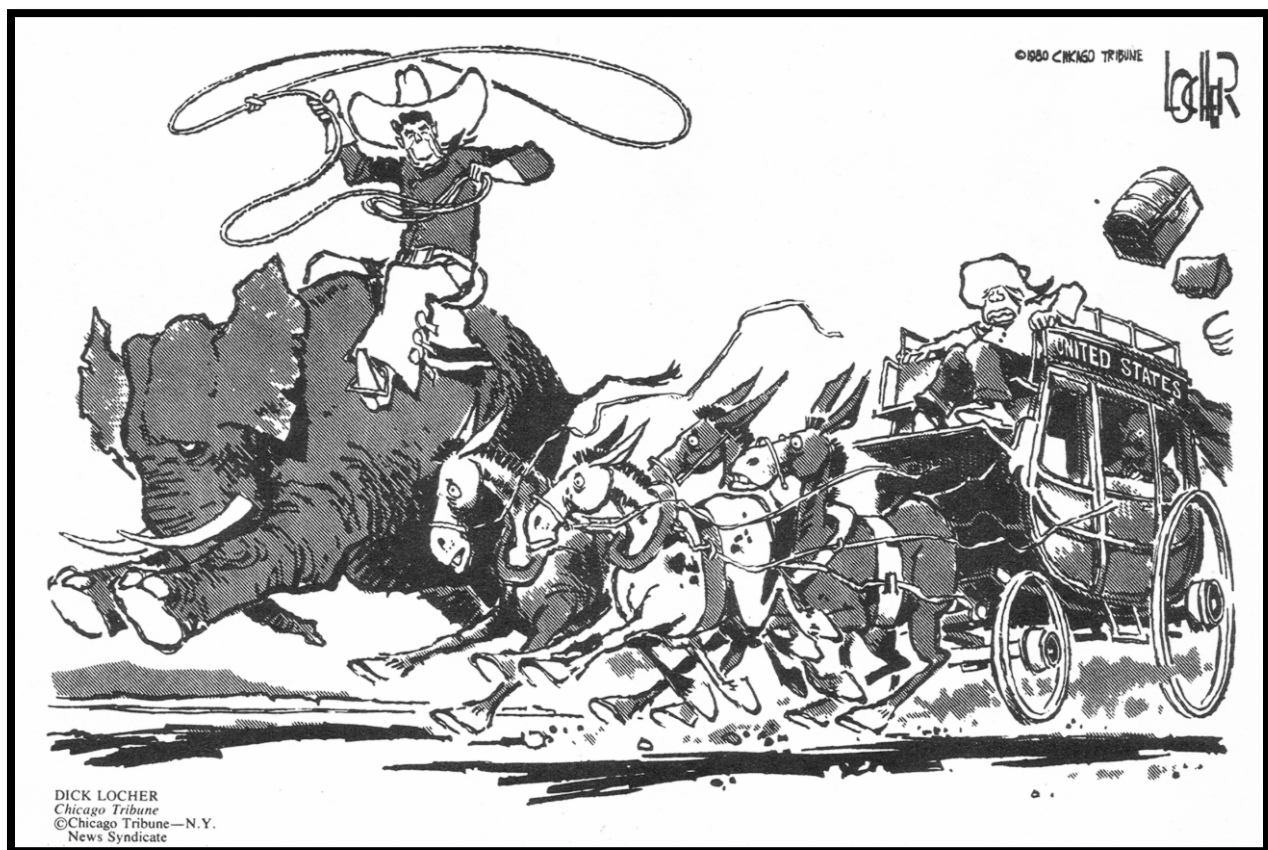
in their history. As a symbolic embodiment of American values, Reagan would renew the nation's past by resuming it. In *John Wayne's America*, historian Garry Wills has described some of the parallels between Reagan's appeal and that of his friend, the Duke. Like the movie version of Wayne, Reagan managed to capture on his political speaking circuit an aura of the Old American West. Reagan's oratory was frequently nostalgic, harkening back to the founding fathers or pioneers who led the fight for "maximum freedom for the individual."<sup>366</sup> Further, Reagan positioned himself as a regular-folks candidate, angry about corruption and incompetence in government, longing for the good old days of the nostalgic frontier, "traditional" family values, the right to bear arms without government interference, free-market individualism, and the champion of strength in the face of vacillating liberals. Reagan's illusionary vision of the past was not challenged to near the degree it could have been, arguably, because the public would rather not come to terms with its real past, and instead preferred Reagan's "happy" substitute. And Ronald Reagan's visions seemed *more* believable because they fit a newly revised structure of the Frontier Myth which he believed in so much himself.

As noted, the Democratic Party had dominated presidential politics for much of the twentieth century. While the GOP had been viewed as a party dominated by a rich and elitist establishment with its power base in the country clubs of the northeast, and some of the more reactionary regions of the Midwest, Democrats were thought to represent the interests of hard-working and patriotic regular folk. But by the end of the Johnson Administration and through the 1970s many conservative Americans perceived a decline in family values, a weak and demoralized military, and a bungling and

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<sup>366</sup> Garry Wills quoted in Cunningham, *Cowboy Conservatism*, 160.

dishonest federal government. Johnson and Carter were portrayed by Reagan's team as having tarnished the American Dream by failing to live up to its alleged ideals. By 1980, the pendulum of the Frontier Myth had swung so far to the right that when asked the ambiguous question of which Party would make America "great once again" the majority now answered that it would be Reagan's Republicans <sup>367</sup>—the "Let's make America great again" phrase even became a key Reagan campaign slogan.



**Figure 8.1:** After three unsuccessful tries for the White House, Ronald Reagan finally made it in 1980 at the age of 69—taking all but six states and D.C. During the campaign, Cowboy Reagan hit hard at Carter's economic policies, blaming him for "runaway" inflation and unemployment. (Dick Locher, *Chicago Tribune*, 1980. Permission of Dick Locher)

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<sup>367</sup> *Ibid*, 5-6.

On the night before the election, Reagan went on national television to tell Americans that “Not so long ago, we emerged from a world war. Turning homeward at last, we built a grand prosperity and hoped—from our own success and plenty—to help others less fortunate....Then came the hard years: riots and assassinations, domestic strife over the Vietnam War and in the last four years, drift and disaster in Washington.” Reagan had been bashing Carter all year for letting America’s defense get soft by cutting the B-1 Bomber program, reducing the Navy, cutting special deals with the Soviets and appeasing the Reds, and for using his “big, liberal government” to threaten “the American way of life.” His use of words like “freedom,” “appeasement” and “weaken” deliberately provoked emotional responses and created a sense of urgency in the minds of Republicans and independents many of whom came to see liberals as extremists that were as dangerous to the well-being of their society as Goldwater had appeared to independents and Democrats in 1964. Significantly, Goldwater had hit on very similar arguments as Reagan during the former’s own frontier campaign of 1964— but the Arizona Senator was then feared as a “kooky” cowboy and, consequently, destroyed at the polling booths by LBJ.<sup>368</sup> By 1980, events had transformed the structure of the Frontier Myth so radically from that of the mid-1960s that an ultra-conservative (Reagan) now appeared more “reasonable” to the national electorate than did an alleged “crazy liberal” (Carter).<sup>369</sup> The Vietnam experience in particular, along with urban violence and decay, Watergate, Iran, and a lengthy economic recession had changed the nature and emphasis of the western myth and got a conservative frontier up and

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<sup>368</sup> In 1964 liberal LBJ captured more than 90% of the Electoral College vote over ultra-conservative Goldwater; Reagan reversed this in 1980 by capturing 90% of the electoral votes from incumbent Democratic President Jimmy Carter. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, Presidential Elections Data, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/elections.php> (accessed 3 September 2014).

<sup>369</sup> See “Old Cowboy” letter to Reagan in Cunningham, *Cowboy Conservatism*, 175.

running. Unable to sustain itself under the force of these powerful events, a new myth structure featuring a conservative philosophy and explanatory narrative for “right-thinking” Americans was forming just as the Reagan ‘80 presidential campaign began hitting its stride. On Election Day, Ronald Reagan bushwhacked Jimmy Carter at the polling booth, capturing 44 states and defeating an incumbent president for the first time since FDR trounced Herbert Hoover in 1932. As historian Sean Cunningham has argued, Carter ultimately lost out in the image war with Reagan in large part because in the battle for public opinion, conservatism was pitched effectively as patriotic and practical while liberalism was now increasingly viewed as the anti-Frontier philosophy—malaise-ridden, extreme and failed.<sup>370</sup>

## **The Hinge**

Twelve years after Johnson left office, the elderly new President Ronald Reagan rode into the White House on the coat tails of a frontier explanation for American society that had been shaken to its core and was now looking *backward* in time—or at least back to an America as it “should have been.” The long-standing progressive Frontier Myth went sour for Democrats with Vietnam, race riots, and related economic troubles which many blamed on Johnson’s Administration. “Anti-Westerns” flourished in Hollywood during the final years of the Johnson presidency as a reaction against Vietnam and the Establishment. The Frontier Myth could no longer accommodate the numerous crises and realities of the late 1960s and Cowboy Johnson had to go. Then Western connections to the presidency (and the Western genre itself in popular culture)

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<sup>370</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Election Eve Address: A Vision for America,” November 3, 1980, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/reference/11.3.80.html> (accessed May 4, 2012); Cunningham, *Cowboy Conservatism*, 219.

faded during the Nixon, Ford and Carter years until conservative Ronald Reagan vied for the Presidency in 1980 on a campaign selling pure strength. Once in office, Reagan and his handlers tapped into powerful myths and symbols to promote policies but chose vastly different emphases on this imagery than LBJ. Reaganites were going to rely on so-called American tradition, an alternative lifestyle to what was ailing the country based on the simple truths of the Old West: individualism, self-reliance, “know how” and higher values. Ronnie Reagan as a Western hero did not answer to regulators and bureaucratic red tape, he offered straight solutions. Reagan was going to shoot down all those impersonal forces at home, especially “big spending liberals” and government bureaucrats that were restricting, scheduling, supervising directing and frustrating their daily existence. He was going to put America “back on top” economically, and stand tall against menacing Communists and Iranian students who had embarrassed the United States and supposedly weakened America’s respect among other nations in the world. In 1980 the California Cowboy’s most famous campaign slogan captured his return to the Frontier philosophy succinctly: “Reagan: Let’s Make America Great Again”.

A shift took place, *the hinge* from Reagan to LBJ. Two political practitioners who came down at diametrically opposite poles: one called for more government intervention, the other called for much less – both counted on the Frontier Myth to deliver. Turner had argued that the two American qualities of tolerance and individualism are in perpetual conflict. The two greatest achievements of the frontier—the construction of a libertarian American individual and the creation of diverse, politically equal democratic communities—were frequently opposed to one another. Johnson chose to emphasize tolerance and a national agenda based on equality as opposed to regional policies and values; Reagan then moved the emphasis to the

opposite end of the scale—toward Goldwater-like libertarian individualism and states' rights. LBJ projected frontier imagery forward in time and Reagan projected it backwards. A dichotomy developed here and with it the discourse shifted; the myth, or at very least its emphasis, adopted and changed. By 1980, the White House and popular culture versions of the Western were well on their way to becoming a narrower, less flexible, conservative voice. Johnson's attempts to bring the full Frontier Myth forward collapsed and—after the myth initially receded into the background—a reactionary, nostalgic way of understanding America replaced the more forward thinking, progressive approach. The version that Reagan espoused is a reasserted structure that looked backward in time to the past to create an argument that the myth had been revitalized by returning to what it originally was, or was supposed to have been. The Reagan Presidency and emergence of Reagan as icon can best be understood not simply as a resurgence of American conservatism—the usual historic explanation—but in the context of a restructured and reoriented version of the Frontier Myth in the face of domestic and international events.

### **Reagan's Early Years in Politics**

To better understand Reagan's presidential relationship to the myth, we need first explore this association over his life and career prior to arriving in the Oval Office. Like so many Californians of his generation, Ronald Reagan came from somewhere else. A transplant from Illinois, he went west to the Pacific Coast while in his twenties. Reagan became a born-again Westerner who later went back to the East as President to bring the mythic rejuvenating powers of the Western frontier to American political life. To

many believers in the rejuvenated and restructured myth, including Reagan himself, the East had become a kind of Europe incarnate: a decaying, stale and corrupt place.<sup>371</sup>

Over the course of his political career, Ronald Reagan consistently deployed frontier symbolism and myth in accordance with his own needs and political objectives—making heavy use of it during his years in office as Governor of California and, in particular, as President of the United States. Reagan also had an angle on promoting western symbolism and myth that previous presidents did not. As a movie actor who signed with Warner Brothers in 1937—the same year that LBJ entered the Congress—Reagan was a professional at acting, memorizing movie script lines, following his directors, and conveying symbolism as the message. What is surprising to many today is that while all but one of Reagan’s fifty-three Hollywood movies showed him in a heroic role only *six* were Westerns.<sup>372</sup> Reagan’s cowboy persona was fully launched by his two year, mid-sixties gig as host and occasional star on *Death Valley Days*: “Where the historical west comes alive.” Taken from a 1930s radio series, the TV version ran continuously from 1952 through the early 1970s, and in 1965-66 Reagan appeared every week to introduce episodes dressed, appropriately, in cowboy attire. But for Reagan the outfit was not just a costume. If he had been denied the opportunity to star in more Westerns during his movie career, he acted this out in both his private life, having

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<sup>371</sup> As Earl S. Pomeroy has argued, once the dangers of the frontier life had clearly past, it was safe for the West set itself up as a place of raw nature and rejuvenation, where rodeos and dude ranches a plenty were created for urbanized, eastern tourists who wanted to see a West which, in large part, never existed. By the mid-twentieth century, Pomeroy notes: “the West plays the West, and acts out a kind of Easterner’s view of the West based more on the testimony of television than of history....” See especially, Earl S. Pomeroy, *In Search of the Golden West: The Tourist in Western America*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, r1990.

<sup>372</sup> Reagan’s six movie-Westerns include: *Law and Order* (1932), *Santa Fe Trail* (1940), *The Bad Man* (1941), *The Last Outpost* (1951), *Cattle Queen of Montana* (1954), and *Tennessee’s Partner* (1955).

The one exception to Reagan’s Hollywood good-guy roles was his evil persona in *The Killers* (1964), where he slapped around co-star Angie Dickinson. It was a part that Reagan confessed later he wished he had never played.



chosen the lifestyle of a gentleman-rancher, and in politics. From that time forward Reagan methodically worked to personally and politically identify himself with those roles that he himself had wanted to star in most<sup>373</sup> and later wished to project to the electorate: especially, that of the all-American cowboy, an archetype of the Old West. Naturally Reagan and his political handlers wanted his image to be linked to those positive values that the Western hero represented: virtuous manliness, individualism, patriotism and various other frontier and “small town values.” Today it is difficult to imagine Reagan in one of his other roles as an architect, concert pianist, college professor, social worker or an insurance adjustor.<sup>374</sup>

During his presidential years, much was made by Reagan himself of his switch from the Democratic to the Republican Party during the mid-twentieth century. From the late 1930s, Reagan had been an active liberal and member of the Democratic Party. In *Reagan's America*, historian Garry Wills asserts that “though Reagan did not change his party registration until 1962, his world and his views were conservative, business-oriented and actively anti-Communist from 1947 on.”<sup>375</sup> During the early Cold War era, Reagan was offended by the reluctance of many of his liberal allies to root out Communists more aggressively and came to view far leftists—who had threatened Reagan himself with physical harm after he became president of the Screen Actors Guild (from 1947-1952, and 1959 to 1960)—with contempt. According to his perceptive biographer Lou Cannon, however, above all else it was Reagan's frustration over liberals' belief in higher taxes for Americans that pushed him toward Republican conservatism.

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<sup>373</sup> During his Hollywood days, Reagan's desire to star in more Western's than he ultimately did is discussed in Murdoch, *The American West*, 111.

<sup>374</sup> Hedrick Smith, Adam Clymer, et al. *Reagan the Man, the President* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1980): 22-29.

<sup>375</sup> Gary Wills, *Reagan's America: Innocents at Home* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1987): 257.

Reagan was the first actor to sign a million dollar contract with the Music Corporation of America (MCA) and, by mid-century, “the cause of lower income taxes became a lifelong obsession with Reagan.” Cannon asserts that this was not purely self-interest but that Reagan had come to the conclusion that high taxes would remove the incentive from Americans to put in the extra effort and hours of work necessary for a thriving economy.<sup>376</sup> As an addendum to Reagan’s party-switching, Wills adds that an internal contradiction would remain a significant part of Reagan’s personae throughout both his acting and political career. Though Reagan greatly admired the armed forces and intelligence services within the government—“loyally spying on people for national security reasons”—and believed government powers should be directed against communism, he was just as staunchly anti-government when it came to the regulation of the movie industry or any other type of business and industry.<sup>377</sup> As we shall see, this kind of contradictory view of government as both a symbol of greatness and colossal hindrance to achieving it would be shared decades later by his frontier president descendent, George W. Bush.

Along with the initial movie-cowboy angle discussed earlier, this study contends that Reagan’s successful political career was based in large part on a longing that many Americans had for the “good old days.” His ideas about pioneering individualism, mobility and personal autonomy struck a responsive chord with many Americans—even though they seemed hardly fitting in a highly industrialized and increasingly urbanized twentieth century society (other Americans, to Reagan’s benefit, contained contradictions too). Reagan was, in many respects, a nineteenth-century man who still

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<sup>376</sup> Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Public Affairs, r2000): 69.

<sup>377</sup> *Ibid*, 256.

preached the unlikely conservative combination of “rugged” individualism along with a constant haranguing for the establishment of “law and order.” In October 1964, Reagan’s political career received a huge boost when he appeared on national television in support of Barry Goldwater in a pre-recorded program entitled “A Time for Choosing.” Here Reagan told his audience: “The Founding Fathers knew a government can't control the economy without controlling people. And they knew when a government sets out to do that, it must use force and coercion to achieve its purpose. So we have come to a time for choosing.”<sup>378</sup> His smoothly delivered message was from the same far right wing of pro-business, libertarianism that he had worked up in his years as a spokesman for GM and as a critic of Medicare—initially viewed by Reagan as a Communist plot. Despite Goldwater’s massive defeat at the polls a few days after the Choosing speech, his friend Reagan’s efforts had raised a million dollars for the faltering Republican campaign, put the actor on the map as a rising political star of the right, and offered a glimpse of a Reagan political philosophy which would remain largely intact throughout the rest of his political career.

In November 1966, student protests at Berkeley and race rioting in Watts helped propel Reagan past Democratic incumbent Edmund G. (Pat) Brown by almost one million votes and into the office of Governor of California.<sup>379</sup> Governor Reagan served from 1967-1975, and his early views on Vietnam were hawkish. Campaigning as a hardliner conservative he called, like Goldwater, for an end to appeasement of Communism, “the most evil enemy mankind has ever known,” stated that “the enemy

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<sup>378</sup> PBS-TV, *The American Experience*, “Reagan: A Time for Choosing,” Transcript: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/reagan-goldwater/> (accessed 25 July 2013).

<sup>379</sup> David Murray, “The Rise of Ronald Reagan,” *The Progressive*, Vol. 23, Issue 2 (February 1968): 18.

should go to sleep at night wondering whether we're going to use nuclear weapons," insisted that "you don't negotiate with gangsters" like the National Liberation Front,<sup>380</sup> and boasted that "We could pave the whole country over for a parking lot and get the boys home by Christmas."<sup>381</sup> On domestic matters, Reagan represented conservatives and loudly opposed LBJ on almost every issue. His attacks on the federal bureaucracy typically included a line he had used in his days as a spokesman for GE and in his speech for Goldwater: "They say the world has become too complex for simple answers. They are wrong. There are no easy answers, but there are simple answers."<sup>382</sup> As for conservation of the Redwood Forests, one of LBJ's proudest initiatives, Reagan mused: "Seen one tree, seen 'em all."<sup>383</sup>

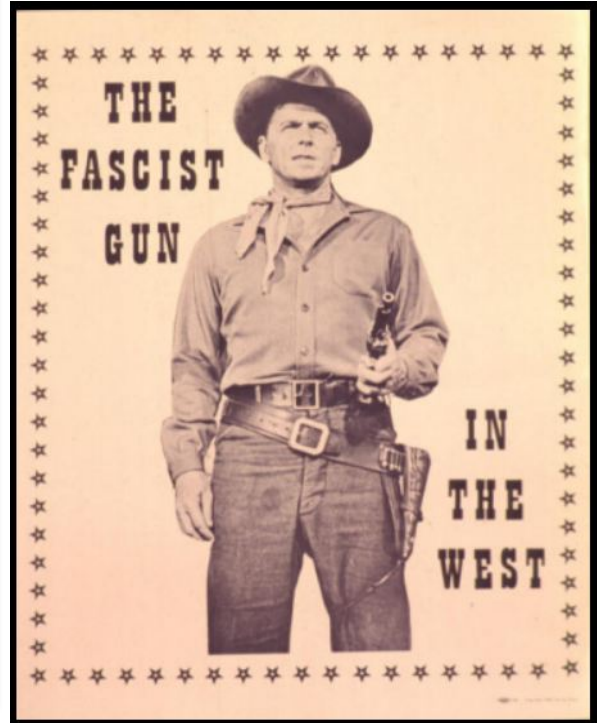
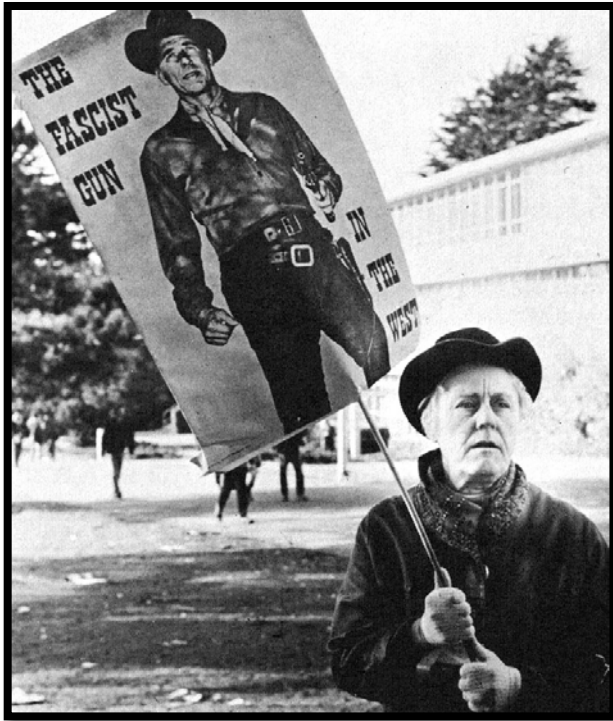
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<sup>380</sup> Reagan quoted in *Ibid*, 19.

<sup>381</sup> Reagan quoted in Herbert Gold, "Notes from the Land of Political Pop," *New York Times Magazine* (cDecember 1967): 48, in the LBJ Library, Office Files of Frederick Panzer, Box 113, Ronald Reagan—file.

<sup>382</sup>Ronald Reagan, "A Time for Choosing," October 27, 1964, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/reagan-goldwater/> (accessed September 17, 2014).

<sup>383</sup> Reagan quoted in Gold, "Notes from the Land of Political Pop," 48.



**Figures 8.2 & 8.3: “The Fascist Gun in the West”:** This cowgirl’s poster of “kook-right” Governor Reagan in gunfighter stance from 1968 (left) was reprised by Reagan opponents during his 1980 presidential bid (right) but, by then, the newly transformed Frontier Myth was working more to his advantage (Left: Photo by Lou de la Torre, 1968, and reprinted here from the *Foundsf* website which has made this photo available under a Creative Commons license for educational purposes; Right: Vic Dinnerstein, *The Fascist Gun in the West*, Photograph: Universal Pictures, 1980, offset poster. Reprinted with permission of the Collection of the Center for the Study of Political Graphics; 9470).

During his first term as Governor, however, Reagan took the advice of his handlers and worked hard to lighten up his emerging image as the “Fascist Gun in the West” (see Figure 8.2). The former celluloid cowboy began to stress neutralization more than nuclearization, toned down his war on trees, and worked hard at making himself more appealing to the general public —moving away from the label of an “extremist” or “showman.”<sup>384</sup> Now, using more carefully crafted wording, Reagan declared: “We have the power to wind it up fast in Vietnam, and I think we should use it. The war must be fought through to victory, meaning first, an end to North Vietnam’s aggression, and

<sup>384</sup> Murray, “The Rise of Ronald Reagan,” 18.

second, an honorable and safe peace for our South Vietnam neighbors.”<sup>385</sup> After such efforts to sound more moderate and to identify himself with more mainstream institutions (through appearances such as his visit to Yale University as a Chubb Fellow), the *Chicago Daily News* observed that Reagan “has brought a large part of the Republican Party right back into the normal give and take process of American politics. He has been, as it were, a de-kooking agent.”<sup>386</sup>

The news media took early notice of Reagan’s presidential prospects as well. In September 1966, before Reagan had even been elected Governor, Drew Pearson in his syndicated “Washington Merry-Go-Round” column was reporting that conservative Republican leaders were:

carefully grooming a Hollywood actor to be President of the United States. For the moment they are not advertising that this is their long-range goal....Under shrewd coaching by his right-wing handlers, who have hired the public relations firm Spencer & Roberts, he has succeeded in blurring [his] image [as a far-right winger]. This blurring of the Reagan image is a result of the decision by the Reagan brain trust that Barry Goldwater’s chief mistake was in being too honest.<sup>387</sup>

Before long, with Reagan, the Republicans seemed to have a Goldwater who was a much more effective speaker, sounded more plausible, and at some point might actually win a national election. Arguably, in terms of substance, Reagan’s ideas and Goldwater’s were virtually identical but by the latter half of the 1960s observers recognized that Reagan’s much more suave and less threatening delivery could be a key element in his future success. As journalist Paul Scott reveals, one troubled “reaction report” sent directly to

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<sup>385</sup> Reagan quoted in Paul Scott, “L.B.J. Watches Gov. Reagan,” *Greenville Herald Banner* (January 30, 1968) in LBJ Library, Office Files of Frederick Panzer, Box 112, Ronald Reagan 1/68 file.

<sup>386</sup> Joseph Kraft, “Reagan De-Kooks the Republicans,” *Chicago Daily News* (December 11, 1967), in LBJ Library, Office Files of Frederick Panzer, Box 113, Ronald Reagan file.

<sup>387</sup> Drew Pearson, “An Actor is Groomed to Be President,” *Washington Post* (September 19, 1966): B15, in the LBJ Library, Office Files of Bill Moyers, Ronald Reagan—file.

President Johnson read: “Reagan is a master of TV and if his local speaking appearances are any indication, he would in a very short time upstage other Republican [presidential] candidates with his simple and appealing solution for Vietnam.” The shape and nature of the Frontier Myth in the late 1960s was not a good match at the national level for Cowboy Reagan just yet but, as Johnson’s staffers apparently feared, his day was coming.<sup>388</sup>

Ronald Reagan and his team’s skillful response to the changing structure of the Frontier Myth was a key ingredient to the rising Republican’s persona and a major foundation for his five presidential campaigns in 1968, 1972, 1976, 1980 and 1984, and served to reinforce the change as well. In all of his campaigns through 1980, Reagan as both Governor and Presidential candidate represented an anti-Johnson figure who opposed “big government” (except in the area of defense spending) and opposed or sought to cut back almost all that the Great Society entailed from school lunch programs to civil rights to conservation. Contrary to Johnson’s attempt to continue “the progressive, community spirit of the pioneers,” frontier cowboy Reagan would rely on so-called American “tradition” based on individualism and other simple truths of the Old West. This played much better to the national audience in 1980—still stinging from Vietnam, still reeling from the Iran hostage situation, and still struggling with post-OPEC crisis high energy costs—than it had in Reagan’s previous campaigns. But it was not these crises that ostensibly caused the shift in American attitudes that Reagan necessarily highlighted and attacked, rather it was the old Republican chestnut of big

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<sup>388</sup> Quotation from LBJ staffers’ reaction report and general fears about Reagan within the LBJ White House are described in Scott, “LBJ Watches Gov. Reagan.” The thick files about Ronald Reagan on file at the LBJ Library (more voluminous than those held for any other potential Republican presidential candidate c1966-68, apart from Richard Nixon) are also indicative of the Johnson team’s concerns about the California Republican.

government and interfering bureaucracy. Reagan told TV viewers on election eve in 1980 that “Americans, who have always known that bureaucracy is the enemy of excellence and compassion, want a change in public life—a change that makes government work *for* the people.”<sup>389</sup> The reluctant gunman from the Far West who (like some modern day Cincinnatus) would willingly give up his tranquil retirement on the ranch, promised voters that, if elected, he would stand tall and defeat all those impersonal forces at home, especially “tax and spend liberals” and government bureaucrats who were restricting scheduling, supervising, directing and frustrating their daily existence. Economic stagflation and threats to America’s pre-eminence in the world were all the fault of those who had misunderstood the “lessons” of the frontier experience: especially Lyndon Johnson. “I am trying to undo the ‘Great Society,’” Reagan recorded in his diary. “It was L.B.J.’s war on poverty that led to our present mess.”<sup>390</sup> With regard to foreign policy, Reagan charged that LBJ and Carter had committed the sin of undermining the belief that America was a favoured nation by losing in Vietnam, allowing the Soviets to run rampant in Afghanistan and permitting Iranian students to embarrass the United States. All of this mayhem, he said, had weakened America’s respect and made it a pitiful giant in the eyes of other nations of the world. He summed up his own return-to-the-glories-of-the-frontier philosophy succinctly with his most famous two campaign slogans: the previously mentioned, “Reagan: Let’s Make America Great Again,” and later his triumphant, “It’s Morning Again in America” in 1984.”

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<sup>389</sup> Ronald Reagan, “A Vision for America,” speech delivered on national television, November 3, 1980. The original draft is dated October 28, 1980 and appeared on display in the Ronald Reagan Presidential Museum, Simi Valley, CA in August 2011.

<sup>390</sup> Reagan’s entry for January 28, 1982 in Ronald Reagan with Douglas Brinkley, ed. *The Reagan Diaries* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007): 65.



## Reagan as a Cowboy Hero

As the nation came to terms with the recent traumas of the war in Vietnam, economic woes, Watergate, and the Iran hostage crisis, the US, once again, appeared in search of itself and this arguably fed in to the nation's increasing reattachment to the Frontier Myth—only now it was a conservative presidential candidate who stood to benefit most from its revised structure. Republican Party campaigners and handlers worked diligently to depict their candidate in the guise of a frontier cowboy during a period in American history when (ironically considering the demise of the western as a Hollywood staple in the late 70s and early 80s) the public yearned for a frontier-type who could pull the nation out of its perceived woeful malaise and Reagan embodied American Western mythology more than any other contenders for the White House since Johnson and Goldwater. Symbolism was key to Reagan's success. His iconic image as the conservative cowboy capable of meeting *any* challenge or defeating *any* foe, was summed up in a 1980 campaign poster, with Marlboro Country having been replaced by the slogan: "America: Reagan Country." At the centre of the image is a smiling Ronald Reagan in a white Stetson with an open-necked denim shirt, while behind him in a haze are images of the flag, Statue of Liberty, a rustic church, the family farm, and Monument Valley. It was as though time had been turned back and the Hollywood directors of near forgotten 1930s B-westerns had been resurrected to design Reagan's public relations campaign. Reagan used the revised Frontier Myth with a great deal of success because he was able to align his presidential image with that of the quintessentially American figure and hero—the cowboy—and, even more importantly, match up his own right wing ideology with the revised vision of America's westering

experience. As Gary L. Gregg has asserted, “No presidency relied more upon visual images and symbolic moments than Reagan’s.”<sup>391</sup>



**Figure 8.4:** This iconic Reagan ‘80 campaign poster replaced Marlboro Country with the slogan: “America: Reagan Country.” (Image courtesy author’s collection)

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<sup>391</sup> Gary L. Gregg, “Ronald Reagan and the Rebuilding of the Symbolic Presidency,” in Paul Kengor and Peter Schweizer, eds., *The Reagan Presidency: Assessing the Man and His Legacy* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005): 139.

Throughout his 1980 presidential campaign, Reagan projected an image that appealed to many American voters during a time when America's military prowess was challenged by the USSR and its economic prowess by Japan. Reagan the cowboy was a strong, unapologetic and most of all heroic leader-type: an image that none of his political rivals, whether Republicans like George H.W. Bush or Democrats like Jimmy Carter, were able to project.<sup>392</sup> America was falling behind, so went the perception, for the very reasons Frederick Jackson Turner had feared—because the country had become urban, intellectual and flabby. Some of the same fears and anxieties experienced in TR's day resurfaced with a vengeance during the Reagan period and once again, the nation looked to the old virile and "manly virtues" of the frontier for answers. Only this time this toughness and virility was not needed to rid the nation of corporate corruption and excesses through a bolstering of federal government powers: instead the new, transformed Frontier Myth had become a reversal of this earlier accepted wisdom that had prevailed during TR's and into LBJ's time in office. On Inauguration Day 1981, a *New York Times* editorialist described how many Americans hoped that Reagan would fulfill the new demands of the myth: "The metaphor seems inevitable," Robert Lindsey observed, "a cowboy in full regalia moves on Washington from out of the West, looking grim and ready for battle with the gang of looters that has taken over the town. He fights for individual liberty, the free enterprise system and a Federal Government that will get off the backs of the people."<sup>393</sup>

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<sup>392</sup> Sarah Russell Hankins, "Archetypal Alloy: Reagan's Rhetorical Image," *Communication Studies*, 34:1 (1983): 34-35.

<sup>393</sup> Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1987): 48; Robert Lindsey, "A Cowboy Hero, Myth and Reality: Western Presidency," *New York Times*, January 21, 1981: 19.

American audiences of the early Reagan period wanted tough, crusading, “red meat-eating” heroes<sup>394</sup> who could avenge, at least symbolically, the humiliations of Vietnam, Watergate and the Iranian hostage crisis that they had to suffer through in the 1970s. America had *lost* a war, crime was seen as unravelling the social fabric, and a perceived breakdown in national discipline was leading to a sense of drift. These events literally shook the core of American society and how it saw itself. Tired of those serious, liberal character-driven movies such as *All the President’s Men*, ‘80s filmmakers could get away with the same simple-minded good versus evil mentality that had sustained the B-Westerns in the 1930s (through Hollywood’s new action heroes Sylvester “Rambo” Stallone, future California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, Chuck Norris, and the like). These were not the tortured and complex western heroes dealing with complex societal issues that audiences had seen in Jimmy Stewart’s *Broken Arrow*, Gary Cooper’s *High Noon*, or even John Ford’s *The Searchers* or *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. Rather, they were the simplistic characters finding simplistic answers as depicted by two dimensional heroes like Hopalong Cassidy, The Lone Ranger, and Roy Rogers. Reagan, in other words, was a B-western actor living in a B-Western world. As the editor of Reagan’s own presidential diaries has noted, the President “pined for the days of his Hollywood youth. There was good and evil and the world was black and white.”<sup>395</sup>

Interestingly, though, Reagan himself had started out as a New Deal Democrat, it was his distaste for federal income tax (after he earned a salary of \$1,000,000, multi-

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<sup>394</sup> “Explosive Return of the Action Heroes,” *Statesman* [India] 30 April 2010. *General Reference Center Gold*. Web (accessed 31 March 2011).

<sup>395</sup> Douglas Brinkley quoted in Lisa Friedman, “Reagan, the Film Buff,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 11, 1997: 11, in the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Newspaper Reference Files, “Reagan, Ronald W. – Movies” file.

year contract with Warner Brothers in the mid-40s) and for liberal leftists within the screen actors guild (which he headed) that apparently caused him to radically alter his political polarity during the 1950s to become a hard right libertarian.<sup>396</sup> Now Hollywood symbols took on a kind of radical individualism that Reagan relished: not only were these heroes the old good versus evil types of his youth, character's like Sylvester Stallone's John Rambo also attempted to confront the receded myth of frontier-masculinity by rehabilitating it and replaying the Vietnam War. As President, Reagan himself enjoyed taunting his domestic liberal enemies with Clint "Dirty Harry" Eastwood's warning: "Go ahead, make my day" as he vowed to veto tax increases in 1985 (which Reagan then asked for in the next budget).<sup>397</sup> On screen, Detective Harry Callahan runs down punks who have made the city a crime-ridden jungle using tactics prohibited by an over-regulated and ineffective police force. His Smith and Wesson revolvers get bigger with each film as he fulfills a need to blow away entire structures of evil, not just individual bad guys. Reagan vowed to employ these alleged frontier values and tactics to rid America's friends of Communists abroad, rid America's streets of criminals at home, and rid the Federal government of vacillating liberalism. The Reagan era would come to represent the heyday of presidential "cowboy conservatism."

### **Reaganism and *The Right Stuff***

Another significant film of the 1980s, *The Right Stuff* (1983), is likewise built around a conservative version of the Frontier Myth, with its emphasis on rugged

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<sup>396</sup> See Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime*, 246.

<sup>397</sup> Ronald Reagan: "Remarks at a White House Meeting With Members of the American Business Conference," March 13, 1985. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=38318>. Reagan is quoting Dirty Harry Callaghan (Clint Eastwood) from *Sudden Impact* (1983), Warner Brothers, Dir: Clint Eastwood.

individualism, conquest and nostalgia. Sam Shephard plays test pilot extraordinaire Chuck Yeager, the man at the center of the film, and personifies him as a Western cowboy hero. Actor Shephard himself exhibited this persona, often wearing a cowboy hat and boots and exhibiting a grace under pressure manner. The director of *The Right Stuff*, Philip Kaufman (who wrote the screenplay for *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, Eastwood's favourite, a few years earlier) recognized Yeager/Shephard as *the* most appealing and marketable icon of the film.<sup>398</sup> Our first sight of Yeager as the lone rider on his horse brings to mind the heroes of Wister and Ford. Yeager rides his horse up to a saloon, saunters in, and orders a whiskey with his buddies. Then he promises to "put the spurs" to the X-1. Here director Kaufman is setting the stage for the rest of the film by superimposing the fantasy of space travel, America's highest frontier, where lone space cowboys will bring security and even a sense of providential order to the empty skies.

Another different kind of "right stuff" cowboy appears in the character of John Glenn (Ed Harris). Glenn much more resembles the clean cut cowboy of the Gene Autry era—or Reagan himself in his cowboy roles—a virtuous hero who abstains from alcohol and promotes the expansion of civilized values and morality into the western/space travel wilderness. Significantly, in a departure from earlier liberal heroes, Glenn becomes the Mercury Seven's most vocal critic of government bureaucrats or functionaries, all of whom treat the astronauts as if they were little more than "spam in a can." One of Ronald Reagan's favourite lines, that government was not the solution but the *problem*, is a philosophy shared wholeheartedly by the heroes in *The Right Stuff*.

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<sup>398</sup> James Scott, "The Right Stuff at the Wrong Time: The Space Nostalgia in the Conservative Ascendancy," *Film & History*, Vol. 40.1 (Spring 2010): 48.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the scenes featuring a bombastic take on LBJ or the U.S. Space Agency's parade of bureaucrats beset with heavy German accents. The Teutonic bumblers, and in some respects the celluloid LBJ himself, are the foils to the values that the astronaut heroes of the film represent. Movie-goers are shown how bloated central planning (propagated by crazy liberals like Johnson) threatened to turn the free and individually talented fly-boy heroes into canned meat, cogs in a mechanical and impersonal system. In face of these American *apparatchiks*, the entrepreneurial and self-reliant astronauts are determined to show what they're made of. The *Seven* are convinced that it is their own personal stories and achievements that will ultimately attract funding to the Mercury program. John Glenn takes charge of the space cowboys' efforts to make crucial changes to the spacecraft, then makes a spectacular landing after a shaky heat shield imperils his spacecraft as the hero hums the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" (apparently some poetic license was taken here<sup>399</sup>) all the way to parachute deployment. As James Scott has asserted: "By the early 1980s *The Right Stuff* [was a] technophilic hymn to the conquest of space...associated not only with the popular Space Shuttle but also with President Reagan's space-based SDI initiative."<sup>400</sup>

### **Cowboy Reagan's "Ranch in the Sky"**

During his presidential years, Reagan's rugged, western image was most visible in the 50 trips that he and Nancy took to *Rancho del Cielo* ("Ranch in the Sky"), where he spent one year of his eight year presidency. The press delivered regular television footage of the President at his 688-acre "Western White House" near Santa Barbara.

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<sup>399</sup> Elizabeth Howell, "Hollywood's Mixed Portrayal of John Glenn," *UniverseToday.com* (February 20, 2013) < <http://www.universetoday.com/100119/hollywoods-mixed-portrayal-of-john-glenn/> > (accessed 21 September 2015).

<sup>400</sup> Scott, "The Right Stuff at the Wrong Time," 56.

While campaigning in 1980 and during his two terms in office, many of the activities and tasks that Reagan performed at the Ranch—riding horses in cowboy garb, clearing brush, mending fences, and signing legislation—were choreographed by his own press team and offered broad and simple metaphors for what he had pledged to do to restore order to his land as the Commander-in-Chief. Reagan was depicted as the rugged individualist on horseback or fence builder with chainsaw in hand who worked the land independent of outside help to build something worthwhile out of the scrub brush of the Santa Barbara hills.<sup>401</sup>

The Reagan and LBJ ranches, like their respective owners, are in many ways a study in contrasts. Both presidents went to their ranches frequently to recharge and rode horses but at that point the similarities end. Unlike the functioning LBJ Ranch, the only cattle at the Reagan's Ranch during his presidency were two Longhorns kept as family pets: Duke and Duchess. In a reversal of LBJ's comfortable, high-tech home at Stonewall, *Rancho del Cielo* had only the most basic of features: no furnace (staffers could be seen regularly stoking fireplaces in the living and family rooms), no bathtub, no dishwasher and a dated roof antenna for the TV. Reagan *never* wanted to modernize and deliberately avoided doing so. While the LBJ Ranch had reveled in presidential trappings and celebrated the executive office, Reagan's Ranch was utterly void of them, save the white phone in the bedroom with a direct line to the Secret Service and the Reagan's choice of address: 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. With a few exceptions (and most of them famous: George and Barbara Bush, Margaret Thatcher, Mikhail and Raisa

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<sup>401</sup> "President Reagan's Trips to Rancho Del Cielo, California, 1981-1989," Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, National Archives and Records Administration, <<http://reagan.utexas.edu/archives/reference/tripsranch.html>> (accessed February 3, 2011); WHTV Footage of President Reagan at Ranch (September 1, 1982 to August 14, 1985), Ronald Reagan Presidential Library Film Collection, Simi Valley, California; *Rancho Del Cielo: Reagan Ranch*, California Gold #127. DVD narrated and produced by Huell Howser (2005).



Gorbachev, Queen Elizabeth and Prince Phillip, and Brian and Mila Mulroney) the Reagans hosted very few guests, rarely inviting senior advisors or even their own children to stay there. The Ranch was, and remains to this day, filled with sketches of cowboys on horseback, often lone figures on the prairie. One observer has suggested that Reagan's choice in ranch-art reflected his own state of mind when he placed them on the walls in the mid-1970s: that of a lone conservative rider wandering the plains.<sup>402</sup>

Johnson and Reagan's adherence to vastly different versions of the Frontier Myth were so deep seated that these convictions were even evident in the choice of their physical surroundings. Where Johnson associated Western imagery with progress, ongoing improvements, and the exploration of the frontiers of the future<sup>403</sup>, Reagan's vision of *returning* America to greatness reached backward in time to reinvigorate the present by returning it to what was still commonly perceived as his nation's "traditional" and "ideal" way of life. More importantly, for the purposes of this study, the frontier message now interacted with a conservative political agenda as well.

### **The Myth and Nostalgic Conservatism**

On social issues from school prayer to sex education, Ronald Reagan was committed to turning back the clock to the values that he saw as governing America in the past. As discussed in previous chapters, LBJ too could be cavalier in the way he understood the history of the West and the pioneering/frontier experience. But the lessons which Johnson used them for were dramatically different than those of Reagan.

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<sup>402</sup> Steven Barrie-Anthony, "Home Is Where His Heart Was," *Los Angeles Times*, June 8, 2004, in Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Newspaper Reference File, "Reagan, Ronald W.—Rancho del Cielo".

<sup>403</sup> As noted earlier in this proposal, Lyndon Johnson's vision of the frontier as an ongoing "molding force" in modern, urban, industrial America is described in his Foreword to the re-issued 1965 edition of Walter Prescott Webb's *The Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense* (Austin: University of Texas Press, r1965); also see Macel D. Ezell, "Lyndon B. Johnson's Sense of the American Past," in "Johnson's Vocabulary and Attitude, 'History' Meant the Future," *Intellect*, May-June 1976: 600-601.

And, I would contend, even more so than his frontier-president predecessors Reagan seemed to have an open preference for myth over his consideration of events both in the present and the past.

Reagan paid little attention to the historical West. His view and descriptions of the past were typically ahistorical and sometimes fictional, selective, and chosen for dramatic effect. Most of all they were driven by priorities of a conservative view of the Frontier Myth. In their study *Personality, Character and Leadership in the White House*, psychiatrists Steven J. Rubenzer and Thomas R. Faschingbauer working in conjunction with several presidential historians, characterize Reagan as the most fantasy driven of all the presidents. “Reagan,” their study contends, “tended to ‘accept as fact any opinion, story, or rumor that tended to support his own point of view.’”<sup>404</sup> While this is arguably true for most leaders, Reagan—possibly because of his past career of acting and pretending in movies and TV—appears to have been especially prone to this weakness. For example, Reagan was evaluated by Rubenzer, Faschingbauer and the presidential historians as *the* president most prone to daydream and as a man who reflects on major problems and issues “from the standpoint of what John Wayne would do.”<sup>405</sup> Reagan would also discuss proposed initiatives—such as the extremely complex and expensive Strategic Defense Initiative—as if they were already up and running, and would demonize America’s enemies (in particular the Soviets), and, in retrospect, appears to have suffered bouts of forgetfulness from the early onset of Alzheimer’s disease. Wilbur Edel once demonstrated at length that the President possessed a remarkable “ignorance of history” and penchant for “acceptance of fantasy in place of

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<sup>404</sup> Steven J. Rubenzer and Thomas R. Faschingbauer. *Personality, Character, and Leadership in the White House: Psychologists Assess the Presidents* (Brassey’s: Dulles VA, 2004): 178.

<sup>405</sup> *Ibid*, 183.

fact.”<sup>406</sup> Even more than LBJ (and, arguably, to a much greater degree than the learned President TR), Reagan seemed prone to allowing the structures of the Frontier Myth to accommodate and therefore interpret contemporary events themselves: with the conservative version of the myth remaining steadily paramount in his thinking and actions as President. Relatedly, for Reagan, what was most important about American history was not what might provide clues to solutions for the complex challenges of modern America—but what could be used to overcome these complexities. Contemporary problems, as Reagan saw them, were the result of the nation’s abandonment of the values that had made the country “great” in the past. He looked back with sincerity and faith to an America as “it should have been.” “If the legend becomes fact,” to quote from Ford’s self-reflexive *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, Reagan believed that America needed to “print the legend.”

Interestingly, the influence of movies on Reagan’s thinking has been observed elsewhere by Lou Cannon and other biographers but it should be noted for the purposes of this study that Ronald and Nancy Reagan watched numerous Westerns at Camp David during their eight years in Washington including many featuring their friends “Duke” Wayne and Jimmy Stewart. Among the John Wayne Westerns viewed by the Reagans were *Big Jake*, *Chisum*, *Red River*, *Rio Bravo*, *Rooster Cogburn* and *The Searchers*; those starring Jimmy Stewart included *Destry Rides Again*, *How the West Was Won*, *The Man from Laramie*, and *Winchester ’73* (twice). Sometimes, Reagan would work descriptions of the scenes or plots from Western movies into his speeches in the days and weeks after he viewed them: as he did during his 1988 visit to Moscow

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<sup>406</sup> Wilbur Edel, *The Reagan Presidency: An Actor’s Finest Performance* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1992): 5, 65.

when he compared perestroika to the scene where Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid jump off a cliff. During the final year, 1988-1989, the Reagans watched eight Westerns at Camp David including two horse operas featuring Reagan himself that had served his political image so well: *Santa Fe Trail*, and the last film viewed before heading back to California, *Cattle Queen of Montana* (shown January 14, 1989).<sup>407</sup> As David Murdoch keenly observed: "What is remarkable is that [Reagan's] version of the myth is so inextricably entangled with movie images, so that one has replaced the other....For Reagan, films did not reflect history, history reflected movies."<sup>408</sup>

On TV, Reagan enjoyed episodes of the 1985 series *Lonesome Dove*: based on one of RR's ten favourite books and authored by Larry McMurtry.<sup>409</sup> The story revolves around a lengthy cattle drive of former Texas Rangers from Texas to Montana and parallels in many ways with the Don Quixote story of an old knight and his adventures. Eden awaited the stalwart. The series fit the Reagan "frontier" era perfectly with its power resting on the resilience of the older myth of the cowboy. As one Texas reviewer who bought into the Reagan era myth wrote, McMurtry "has distilled the westering experience to its essence."<sup>410</sup>

Reagan's own preference for myth over actual events is also evident in his correspondence. In a letter which the President wrote to a young disabled man, Peter Aviles of Caldwell, Idaho on January 28, 1985, Reagan referred to himself as a "history

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<sup>407</sup> The complete list of films of the Reagans' White House movie nights was posted online at: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, "Films President and Mrs. Reagan Viewed," National Archives and Records Administration, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/reference/filmsviewed.html> (accessed 3 February 2011).

<sup>408</sup> Murdoch, *The American West*, 115.

<sup>409</sup> Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985) was described by Reagan as one of his ten favourite books and for this reason appeared in a special display at the Reagan Ranch Center Museum, Santa Barbara CA, which I visited in August 2011.

<sup>410</sup> Leonard Sanders, *Fort-Worth News Tribune*, August 16, 1985 quoted in Ernestine P. Sewell, "McMurtry's Cowboy-God in 'Lonesome Dove,'" *Western American Literature*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Fall 1986): 225.

buff” with a “main interest in the American West.” He continued: “As some historian put it, it was the most unusual march of empire in world history. It wasn’t led by the military but by settlers who bet their lives and the lives of their families as they opened up the west in the face of hardship and hostile Indians.”<sup>411</sup> The President acknowledged his own mythic understanding of the West and both promoted and defended this limited view by emphasizing its moral function. When Reagan opened “The American Cowboy” Exhibit” at the Library of Congress in 1983, he applauded the “ideals of courageous and self-reliant heroes, both men and women,” which “are the stuff of Western lore.” Then he explained through reference to a “noted historian” (Henry Steele Commager) that “Americans, in making their Western myths, were not put off by discrepancies with reality. Americans believed about the West not so much what was true, but what they thought ought to be true.” He continued: “Lacking the common heritage that bound other nations together, they were forced to look elsewhere for the basis of their national existence. And they found it,” thankfully, in Reagan’s view, “in the West.”<sup>412</sup>

Whether fully conscious of it or not, Reagan and his Administration were offering a counter thrust against the “New Western History” and now reclaimed the frontier, even a less than “real” one, as good, right and proper. When the optimistic conservative Reagan told Americans that “our best days are ahead of us” what he meant was that the future would be better because under his leadership the spirit of enterprise and

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<sup>411</sup> Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Presidential Handwriting File Series II: Presidential Records, Box 11, Folder 162 (January 26, 1985 to January 28, 1985), PR007 287180, Reagan response letter to Peter Aviles (January 28, 1985).

<sup>412</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the Opening of ‘The American Cowboy’ Exhibit at the Library of Congress,” March 24, 1983. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=41095> (accessed March 13, 2012).

adventure would be imported from the past.<sup>413</sup> As Reagan wrote in his auto-biography: “I thought then, and I think now, that the brief post-Civil War era when our blue-clad cavalry stayed on a war-time footing against the plains and desert Indians was a phase of Americana rivalling the Kipling era of color and romance.”<sup>414</sup> The former actor did not only wish to revive the spirit of the nation he wanted to “resurrect” his idealized and sentimental vision of the past as well.<sup>415</sup> In the aftermath of the tumultuous late 1960s and 1970s, Reagan’s comfort level with historical neglect and adherence to a new right-wing revision of the Frontier Myth met with a generally receptive American audience. As historian Ray Allen Billington told the *New York Times* in 1981, a popular myth emerged that “the frontier was a land of unrestrained liberty, where the individual was supreme and law was dispensed out a holster instead of a law book. It really wasn’t like that,” Billington explained. “But people believe the myth that was created...and Reagan has come to personify those things: they aren’t true but it doesn’t matter because people think they are.”<sup>416</sup> Reagan the candidate and president communicated in simple terms, through patriotic, uplifting and often imaginary Western stories, metaphors, films and anecdotes to promote a vastly different agenda from that of LBJ, including: law and order, family values, tough talk in dealing with the Soviet Union, a guns over butter approach to government spending, libertarianism and individualism over Civil Rights and inclusion, and (at least rhetorically) a reduction of size and role of the federal government in American life.

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<sup>413</sup> Ronald Reagan: “Inaugural Address,” January 21, 1985. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=38688>> (accessed February 23, 2012).

<sup>414</sup> Ronald Reagan’s autobiography quoted in Murdoch, *The American West*, 115.

<sup>415</sup> Murdoch in *Ibid*.

<sup>416</sup> Billington quoted in Lindsey, “A Cowboy Hero, Myth and Reality,” 19.

In *Discovered Lands: Invented Pasts: Transforming Visions of the American West* (1992), Martha Sandweiss observes that the myths of the West—of discovery, the adventuring spirit of the pioneers, of tough individualism and self-reliance—are rooted too deeply in the American psyche to be eliminated by historical “fact.” And as Brian Dippie demonstrated through his study of the “Vanishing American,” myths have consequences. The dominance of myth over fact and the influence of myth-based beliefs in shaping the actions of the Chief Executive would prove as evident during the Reagan Years as it had during the presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson: only this time, events of the previous decade had caused changes to the mythic structure that would result in a right-wing reorientation of federal policies and programs. As will be asserted in Chapter IX, the conservative Frontier Myth of the 1980s and the politics, policies and nature of the “Reagan Revolution” were inexorably linked.<sup>417</sup>

### **Conclusion: Reagan as the Right Wing’s Frontier Antidote to LBJ**

In earlier chapters this dissertation explored how Lyndon Johnson and his 1964 campaign team had characterized Barry Goldwater as a reckless, selfish and irresponsible cowboy who did not live up to the frontier values of the postwar generation. Given Ronald Reagan’s similar, if much smoother, platform on the issues one might assume that had he ever run against Reagan, LBJ would have taken a similar tack.

But during the late 1960s and afterwards, then California Governor Reagan had plenty to say about Democratic President Johnson: in fact he soon became arguably the

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<sup>417</sup> Martha A. Sandweiss, *Print the Legend: Photography and the American West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

most effective of the Republican LBJ-bashers in the Southwest. On speaking tours in his state of California, Johnson's home state of Texas, and other "frontier" states, Reagan then portrayed himself as being on a "Crusade for the people." In contrast to the Liberal Establishment, he attacked LBJ's Great Society as "having been set up in opposition to the vast majority of American interests, linked this to Johnson's widening credibility gap...blamed LBJ's social policies for the formation of radical left splinter groups" and called "upon LBJ to do more, not less, to win the war in Vietnam."<sup>418</sup> Two decades later this same line of attack was used by Reagan on the Democratic Party's vision. In 1988, at a fundraising dinner in Houston, now President Reagan used cowboy talk to chide "the Democrats...once proud-party which used to stand for economic growth at home and expanding the frontiers abroad—a proud bull with a passion for justice and liberty." Now, Reagan insisted, after years of weak, liberal leadership the party he had once belonged to had allegedly been reduced to "a stampeded steer, cowed by special interests at home and enemies of freedom abroad."<sup>419</sup> In an article published in *The Nation*, "The Age of Reaganism," liberal journalist Andrew Kopkind described the overall values of Reagan's Cowboy Code as one that valued private and not public institutions—apart from the masculine element, the very antithesis of *most* of the values promoted by LBJ: "competitive enterprise over collective endeavor, the family unit over the heterogeneous community... patriotism over internationalism, selfishness over altruism, having over sharing."<sup>420</sup> For Reagan, the implications for the Frontier Myth were clear: LBJ had not "cowboyed up" to the traditional values of individualism, self-

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<sup>418</sup> Cunningham, *Cowboy Conservatism*, 91.

<sup>419</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at a Republican Party Fundraising Dinner in Houston, Texas," September 22, 1988. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=34876>. (accessed 13 November 2014).

<sup>420</sup> Kopkind, Andrew. "The Age of Reaganism," *The Nation* (7 June 2004), online: <http://www.thenation.com/print/article/age-reaganism> (accessed November 13, 2014).



reliance and America's duty to face down and defeat the bad guys from behind the barrel of a Smith and Wesson. LBJ had failed the myth. Reagan had taken advantage of and would reinforce the new rightist structure through programs that changed and even reversed the liberal trajectory that had shaped the administrations of the earlier frontier presidents.

## IX.

### Reagan's Policy Frontiers at Home and Abroad

Yes, the choice before the American people this year is just as clear as it was in 1980 and 1984: a choice between, on the one hand, liberal policies of tax and spend; gun control; economic stagnation; international weakness; and always, always 'blame America first'; and on the other hand, what we believe—the policies of limited government, economic growth, individual opportunity, a strong defense, firmness with the Soviets, and always, always, 'I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America'.

America has saddled up....We're keeping a promise that is as old as this land we love and as big as the sky. We need you to put on your spurs and ride with us.

—President Ronald Reagan campaigning on behalf of VP George HW Bush (1988) <sup>421</sup>

The conservative contours of the transformed Frontier Myth were both deliberately and subconsciously mirrored in the policies, programs and ideology of the Reagan Administration. Events of the late 1960s and 1970s had caused a shift in the myth's emphasis that appeared a near eclipsing of those national priorities that had allowed LBJ to soundly defeat Barry Goldwater in the presidential contest of 1964. When Ronald Reagan ran for President in 1980 it was as the "great emancipator." But Reagan was not campaigning in support of civil rights or anti-poverty legislation; instead he was selling his right wing pledge to free Americans from economic stagflation, the legacy of Vietnam and the Iranian hostage crisis, and most of all, from the restraining hands of liberals.

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<sup>421</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at a Republican Campaign Rally in Mesquite, Texas," *Public Papers of the Presidents*, American Presidency Project, November 5, 1988, <<http://www.Reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1988/110588c.htm>> (accessed July 13, 2011).

Events of the previous decade-and-a-half had overturned the liberal Frontier Myth and replaced it with a conservative one as events not only affected structure, but the structure would shape events. As Marshall Sahlins contends, the two were mutually informing. With “Reaganomics,” new capital released through tax cuts and deregulation, promised to bring back to the American economy the rapid expansion and high growth rates of the past that Turner’s Frontier thesis had once said were made possible through the continual expansion of the frontier into regions rich in natural resources. Reagan would also initiate the largest peacetime military buildup in US history and a Strategic Defense Initiative program both as a “big stick” to use against the allegedly expansionist Soviets and to restore America’s position as the world’s undisputed number one Superpower. Reagan’s Eighties was a decade of national renewal and national excess. The decade was also characterized by restorative nostalgia: the desire to “return to the good old days” (which the frontier was now understood as representing), a rebirth in national pride, and, in its darker manifestations, a search for ‘black hats’ to be defeated so that the promise of the imagined homeland of the past could be restored. It is no coincidence that the president’s policy actions paralleled so closely the values and symbolism of the resurgent myth of the frontier, a vision which, having recently been transformed, came once again to be perceived as offering an explanation for the entire American experience.

This said, adherence to the revised Frontier Myth created challenges and problems for Reagan and his team as well when events challenged the structure they had rode to the White House. As will be explored, the “Sagebrush Rebellion” over the control of public lands at first seemed to tie Reagan’s stance most closely to the idea of the American frontier as a focal point of the nation’s libertarianism and democracy; it

ultimately failed, however, when most of its advocates concluded that the risks of individual state over federal control outweighed the potential benefits. In 1983, the airing of a TV-movie about nuclear annihilation—and a series of real world events both preceding and following its release—caused Reagan and the American public to re-examine some of their assumptions about the Cold War and the US-Soviet relationship. The bombing of the Marines barracks that same year and Iran-Contra scandal in the latter half of the decade, meanwhile, would confound and frustrate Reagan. And, as with LBJ, the President's adherence to the tough, "manly" principles of the myth severely limited his options and brought disastrous results. Ideas, as Brian Dippie contends, had direct consequences for policy formation during the Reagan Administration but that did not mean that ideas could predict the future. Rather, the influence of ideas on policy brought sometimes unpredictable outcomes and ultimately, adjustments to and the dominant contours of the Frontier Myth and, consequently, to aspects of Reaganism itself.

### **Morning in America**

Ray Allen Billington had identified the frontier thesis' most outstanding feature as optimism: one earned through Americans' triumphant taming of the West. Ronald Reagan tapped heavily into this aspect of the myth by breaking the mould of older generations of conservatives and employing the same spirit of optimism and hope that liberals had projected—only this time in the name of policies that were conservative. And Reagan did this in ways that no Oval Office predecessor had done. Contrary to others in the Republican Party, including Goldwater, Reagan perceived that he could not govern the country as a pessimist. Previously, most conservatives had always promoted

a strand that was pessimistic and negative about human nature but Reagan thought that raising spirits in the country was a practical way to make good things happen, including: investments, confidence in the military, and having children.<sup>422</sup>



**Figure 9.1: Barry Goldwater was out-cowboyed by LBJ in 1964 but Reagan learned from his old friend's mistakes, benefitted politically from later events which had unravelled the nation, and would ride his own conservative version of the Frontier Myth all the way to the White House in 1980. Here they meet in the Oval Office to admire an apt gift just one month after RR's first inauguration. (Courtesy Ronald Reagan Library, White House Photograph Collection, Photo #795-2, Frame 4A, February 23, 1981)**

As President, Ronald Reagan spoke optimistically of returning and restoring America to an idyllic time of days past. Likewise, Reagan constantly invoked the past in

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<sup>422</sup> For example see Robert Goldberg's description of Goldwater versus Reagan in "The Western Hero in Politics," 29-30.

ideal, reassuring terms, and thought he lived through much of it. In Reagan's depiction of the frontier past, American imperialism out West was all for the good and in the present social problems and disagreeable social groups (minorities, the poor, and intellectuals) were either ignored or obstacles to be pushed out of the way as part of the president's attempt to control the future by making it into the past. Reagan's version of the myth itself had remained an optimistic vision for real *bona fide* Americans but, it was a narrower, less flexible and more exclusionary one than had been the case in previous decades.

Nowhere were Reagan's brand of and connections to a conservative, return to the past, and optimistic Frontier Myth made more explicit than in his Presidential ad campaigns. At the 1984 Republican National Convention, and on paid TV airtime afterwards, the Reagan Campaign ran an 18 minute commercial created by ad-man extraordinaire Hal Riney and formally entitled *Prouder, Better, Stronger*—but now more widely known as *Morning in America*. At the beginning of the polished film the impression is created that America, like Rip Van Winkle, has long been asleep (in this case economically and politically) and only awakens with the 1981 inaugural ceremony depicting Reagan with his hand on the Bible taking the oath of office. The scenes which directly follow depict morning imagery from across the country. Reagan tells us: “Yes, it was quite a day, a new beginning.” As we witness the “birth” of Reagan's Presidency and are told: “It's morning in America.” Soon ordinary Americans and VP Bush explain to viewers that there's been “a renewed sense of pride and patriotism” in the country and that “the country's moving again.” In choreographed footage of the President and First Lady's trip through the Far East, Reagan tells us in a voice-over: “Our trip to Japan, Korea, and later the People's Republic of China, makes you realize that the old line ‘Go

West, young man, go West,' still fits. There's a new frontier out there, there's a future and the United States is going to be very much a part of that future." Here the Frontier Myth and Reagan's cowboy status is plainly evoked as is America's expanding role on an "international" frontier. On the South Korean edge of the DMZ, Reagan exalts American troops stationed there as everyday heroes. He appears in an army mess hall, dressed in battle fatigues. The President tells us: "I've never seen such morale, such esprit de corps, such pride in their work. All of us here at home should remember all of those young men and women on the frontiers of freedom." For Reagan and his filmmakers, the "frontiers of freedom" phrase (also a favourite of LBJ's) represents the outermost edge of American influence: everything within her sphere is safe, good and civilized but outside is unknown and potentially uncivilized. The mythic pioneer and American heroes on the frontier likewise had to fight and guard to protect the advancing civilization and also to push the frontier further as he brought new land into America's domain. Cattle boss Reagan and his boys on the Korean Peninsula are portrayed as paladins of the American way, fighting on "the "frontiers of freedom" to defend democracy from all that is lying beyond the frontier with the evils of communism.<sup>423</sup>

As the leading man in the story of his Presidency, Reagan was packaged as the political embodiment of the frontier/cowboy hero in the white hat, an active force who has arrived from outside to help right the prevailing wrongs and get the country moving again. His manliness is perceived in his tough stands on military posture, his seemingly decisive views on domestic policy, and his tall, "rugged" appearance. Here the president's handlers tapped directly into the simple truths of the Old Frontier:

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<sup>423</sup> *Prouder, Stronger, Better* [a.k.a. *Morning in America*], GOP Convention Film (8/23/84) and Ronald Reagan Presidential Campaign Television Commercial (18 minutes), Pytko Productions, Dir: John Pytko. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library Film Collection.

individualism, self-reliance, higher values, and the bristling “know how” of America’s advanced and potent military technology. Reagan’s Democratic opponents, meanwhile, were pushed into contrasting imagery and portrayed by those on the right as “impractical, ineffectual and effete.”<sup>424</sup> Ultimately, *Morning in America*’s Reagan is portrayed as the sanctifier of community: he is the “natural” inheritor of the presidential office and if Americans want the final chapter of this heroic tale to be written, then they will need to cast their vote in November to re-elect Ronald Reagan as their President. His success at the polls in 1984, with Reagan/Bush winning every state except Minnesota and the District of Columbia, is a reflection of the importance of imagery in political campaigns. Frontier symbolism and myth would play a crucial role in Reagan’s presidential policy-making as well.

### **Reaganism at Home: The Frontier “Principles” of Freedom & Individualism**

Of all the principles that Reagan emphasized in his frontier rhetoric, freedom and individualism were perhaps the most pronounced. The President told Americans that they were a community unique in history because “we unleashed the energy and individual genius of man to a greater extent than has ever been done before.”<sup>425</sup> As a result, Reagan would say, “Freedom and dignity of the individual have been more available and assured here than in any other place on Earth.”<sup>426</sup> Here Reagan is drawing on a selective rightest version of the Frontier Myth emphasizing Turner’s “masterful

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<sup>424</sup> William F. Lewis, “Telling America’s Story: Narrative Form and the Reagan Presidency,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 73 (1987): 286.

<sup>425</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Inaugural Address,” January 20, 1981. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.uscb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=43130> (accessed November 14, 2011).

<sup>426</sup> Ronald Reagan: “Address to the Nation on Federal Tax Reduction Legislation,” July 27, 1981. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsbb.edu/ws/?pid=44120> (accessed 22 February 2012).



grasp of material things,” and American exceptionalism—two features which would become ideological pillars of both his domestic and foreign policies.

A radical conservative, Ronald Reagan portrayed American history as a struggle to preserve America’s freedom, greatness and values against major obstacles imposed by economic adversity, Big Government, and sinister enemies (especially Communists and terrorists). Reagan believed that Americans had always had the opportunity to achieve greatness and were better off going it alone without outside help. The domestic evils of government regulation and taxation, and the need to maintain the nation’s military strength, always remained paramount in stories that Reagan told and heavily influenced his policies at home and abroad. He also repeatedly told Americans that if they chose to participate in the story—that is, the conservative myth structure of their era— then they would become part of their nation’s greatness.

President Reagan hailed the decentralization of government and portrayed this as harkening back to an era of unregulated individualism. His cowboy-politician image of the ‘80s emphasized the handling of adversity through independence and isolated self-reliance. To bolster these attributes Reagan took the opposite approach to TR and Lyndon Johnson: instead of investing in community welfare and giving impoverished people the support that liberals believe are needed to increase the level of freedom and independence, Reagan cut public assistance programs, deregulated banking, business and environmental codes, and decentralized the federal government: all for what he told Americans was a harkening back to the old days of rugged individualism. Reagan claimed that Jimmy Carter had blamed ordinary Americans for the nation’s ills (actually Carter had asked Americans to work together to improve the situation); supposedly reversing Carter’s stance, Reagan then identified the little folks with the essential

goodness of the nation. The real culprit was not the average American, Reagan insisted. "In this present crises," he told the nation in his first inaugural address (written entirely by himself), "government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem."<sup>427</sup> Reagan poured his conservative critique on even thicker in his address of election eve, 1984, when—again sounding much like Goldwater two decades earlier—he told voters that professional politicians (or what he usually referred to as "the liberal establishment") had poisoned the nation's well-being:

As you worked harder to keep up with inflation, they raised your taxes. When our industries staggered, they piled on more regulations. When educational equality slumped, they piled on more bureaucratic controls. They watched crime terrorize our citizens and responded with more lenient judges, sentencing, and parole. When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, they punished our farmers with a grain embargo and neglected to build our defenses.<sup>428</sup>

Cowboy Reagan warned Americans that they faced two specific adversaries: their own government at home and the Soviet Union abroad. At home if problems arose from earlier decisions, those were the government's decisions—not the peoples. But, through their renewed faith in their frontier heritage, Americans could "stand tall" to overcome impending dangers and accomplish anything.

Reagan's frontier prescription, rooted in a construct of the imagination, was problematic in terms of late twentieth century realities. One of the great ironies of the Reagan Administration's push for decentralization—the "New Federalism" which was characterized as harkening back to the days of "rugged individualism"—was that it

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<sup>427</sup> Ronald Reagan: "Inaugural Address," January 20, 1981. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=43130> (accessed February 22, 2012).

<sup>428</sup> Ronald Reagan: "Address to the Nation on the Eve of the Presidential Election," November 5, 1984. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=39385> (accessed 22 February 2012).

simultaneously drove hard toward *bolstering* both ideological centralization and conformity. Diversity no longer had a home in the Frontier Myth of the Reagan years.<sup>429</sup>

### **Reagan as a “Sagebrush Rebel”**

For more than three decades, the Sagebrush Rebellion has been associated in popular memory with Ronald Reagan and his controversial Secretary of the Interior, James Watt. The “rebellion” pitted ranchers, loggers, miners and others against Washington bureaucrats in a conflict over the West’s land, water, and natural resources. Here the two frontier ideals of the construction of a libertarian American individual and its creation of democratic equality for all Americans (with support of a federal government ‘equalizer’) appeared to come into direct opposition to one another. The biggest spark igniting the rebellion was the 1976 Federal Land Policy and Management Act, which legislates that public land must be kept in perpetual trust by the government in Washington DC. Western-Federal relations soured further when the Carter Administration brought in staffers from environmental groups to help shape key Interior Department policy decisions. Though somewhat disjointed, Westerners of the late 1970s and early 1980s “rebellion” agreed on one thing, that the region’s destiny was being dictated by outsiders who did not understand the West and were exploiting it and them. During the initial scuffles, angry Alaskan ‘Rebs’ burned an aircraft belonging to the National Park Service; that same state’s voters also approved a proposal setting up a special statehood commission to “reconsider and recommend appropriate changes”—a

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<sup>429</sup> Ole E. Moen, “Frontier and Region: The West and American Exceptionalism from John Winthrop to Ronald W. Reagan,” *American Studies in Scandinavia*, Vol. 22 (1990): 66.

kind of symbolic attempt to secede from the Union. Other Western states passed legislation that laid claim to parts of the 700 million acres of land under federal control.

By 1979, a *New York Times* headline declared: “West Taking South’s Place as Most Alienated Area.”<sup>430</sup> Carter officials were baffled by the depth of resulting western antagonism since, from their own standpoint, they were simply asserting the broader national *and* western interests against more parochial western interests. A few months later, Washington outsider Ronald Reagan was going out of his way to identify himself as “a Sagebrush rebel” bent on crushing the alleged corruption and tyranny of the East while defending the pioneering values of the West. While campaigning in Idaho Falls in 1980, the Republican presidential candidate pledged: “The next administration won’t treat the West as if it were not worthy of attention. The next administration will reflect the values and goals of the Sagebrush Rebellion.”<sup>431</sup> The myth of the West as most representative of the independent and “free” Americans (as opposed those corrupt, meddling Easterners) and Reagan’s vague pronouncements supporting the “Rebs” had emerged just in time for the 1980 presidential election campaign. But as Richard White has characterized it, the Rebellion was “a very old play staged under a new title...yet another attempt to get the federal government to cede public lands to the states.” White pointed out that one of the great paradoxes of the West was its image of a land of rugged individualism while, in reality, it was also the region of the country (excluding the Pacific Coast) *most* dependent on the federal government.<sup>432</sup>

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<sup>430</sup> John Herbers, “West Taking South’s Place as Most Alienated Area,” *New York Times* (March 18, 1979): 1, in *ProQuest Historical Newspapers* (accessed 9 August 2013).

<sup>431</sup> Reagan quoted in “The Sagebrush Rebellion,” *US News and World Report* (December 1, 1980). Access: < <http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/PVCC/mbase/docs/sagebrush.html> > (26 February 2012).

<sup>432</sup> White, *It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own*, 567.

In the end, while the Sagebrush Rebellion had support of a number of interest-groups, it never had a carefully developed or consistent ideology that could explain why state ownership would make the West more well-off or better serve the nation's interest in terms of fairness. Under the existing system, many ranchers, miners and recreationists (the latter of which had opposed state ownership to begin with) came to the realization that all had free access to federal lands under the existing system but that this might end once placed under a state jurisdiction.<sup>433</sup> When he became President, Reagan's Secretary of the Interior James Watt's own thoughtless, pro-development statements helped further galvanize opposition from environmentalists and rebels alike and kill the remnants of the rebel support. And once the lines of controversy became clearer the Reagan Administration withdrew its initial support. This was one battle that "The Gipper" did not win; it also provides us with an early case of where the conservative myth's power to persuade, while initially potent, had limits when contemporary realities and events did not fit comfortably within its parameters.<sup>434</sup>

## **Race Relations**

Both Theodore Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson's ideas about race relations on the frontier and in modern America evolved and acquired more depth over time but this issue would always remain a blind spot for Ronald Reagan. Here political expediency and Reagan's own adherence to the conservative brand of the myth appear to have been in back of his myopia. During the 1960s, Reagan usually avoided anything to do with the Civil Rights movement and the politics of racial justice. Reagan's Deputy Chief of Staff,

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<sup>433</sup> Robert H. Nelson, "Why the Sagebrush Rebellion Burned Out," *Regulation: AEI Journal on Government and Society* (May/June 1984): 35.

<sup>434</sup> For a solid overview of the Sagebrush Rebellion from the perspective of a federal economist, see *Ibid*, 27-35.

Michael Deaver, would later state that “Reagan never got beyond the Jackie Robinson story.”<sup>435</sup> Lou Cannon concurs that while Reagan was no racist, he also “described racial prejudice like it was all in the past....He never got to the next level on the issue.”<sup>436</sup> Cannon points out that throughout his career there was never anyone trying politically to get him there since African-Americans did not support RR anyway. Perhaps as a result, so the argument runs, Reagan never openly advocated racist practices and did not condemn them either. For example, in 1964, when he delivered the biggest speech of his career up until that time, “A Time for Choosing”—at the very height of changes in Civil Rights—Reagan incredibly made no reference to these historic issues.<sup>437</sup> When pressed, Reagan would say that he opposed the Civil Rights legislation of the Johnson Administration arguing that such social change, even if desirable, should not be spearheaded by the national government. If one can judge from his actions and words (or lack of them), it appears that the questions of racial justice did not interest him as he gave little thought to what it meant to be a minority in America, “the land of the free.” For Reagan, “traditional” individualism always trumped social engineering and state-sponsored inclusion.

Politically, during his presidential years, Ronald Reagan appears to have found it difficult to express his distaste for racism primarily because of the support that he sought and received from Southern conservatives (both Republicans and “boll weevil” Democrats); as a result, African-Americans are probably the minority group most disillusioned with the Reagan White House years.

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<sup>435</sup> Michael Deaver quoted in Bernard von Bothmer, *Framing the Sixties: The Use and Abuse of a Decade from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010): 65.

<sup>436</sup> Lou Cannon quoted in Bothmer, *Framing the Sixties*, 65.

<sup>437</sup> PBS-TV, *The American Experience*, “Reagan: A Time for Choosing,” Transcript: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/reagan-goldwater/> (accessed 25 July 2013).

In addition to the pragmatic (or opportunistic) political incentives, though, part of Reagan's disinterest and at times seeming indifference to racial issues may *also* stem from the fact that he was largely unable to incorporate history into his own mythic understanding of America's past. In his debate with Jimmy Carter, Reagan responded as follows to a question about America's future as a multi-racial society: "I believe in it. I am eternally optimistic, and I'm happy to believe that we've made great progress from the days when I was young and when this country didn't even know it had a race problem." Carter then challenged his opponent's confusion and ignorance by pointing out that minorities were well aware of a race problem in the early twentieth century. Carter suggested Reagan's evasion of the question seemed to suggest that, for him, "this country" meant white America. The root of the trouble for Reagan was that he never came to terms with the serious inconsistencies in his mythic narratives about unity and coherence in the American Western and national experience.<sup>438</sup> Reagan's belief in and preaching of frontier "optimism," as identified by Billington, seemed to create blinders for Reagan in terms of the reality for those Americans—minorities and the poor—who lived on the margins or were excluded from the kind of society that the Reaganites envisioned. As with the mythic frontier of Reagan's imagination, his vision was that of a mainstream, masculine America where the nation's historic ethnic and racial variety, women and the impoverished were missing. It was this same nostalgic drive to restore a vanished past that had shifted the Frontier Myth from one of liberalism and inclusion to one of conservatism and exclusion.

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<sup>438</sup> Jimmy Carter: "Presidential Debate in Cleveland," October 28, 1980. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*.  
<<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29408>> (accessed 14 March 2012).

One group of peoples that Reagan did not want projected into the past to allow a history were Native Americans: the old “savage” enemy (replaced in the twentieth century by Communists) and obstruction to Turner’s “superior” American civilization. In 1988 when a university student in Moscow, USSR asked Reagan to explain the disastrous economic and social conditions of the nation’s Native American population, the President responded: “We have provided millions of acres of land for what are called preservations—or reservations, I should say. They [American Indians], from the beginning, announced that they wanted to maintain their way of life, as they had always lived there in the desert and the plains and so forth.” Then the President mused, but “maybe we made a mistake. Maybe we should not have humored them in that, wanting to stay in that kind of primitive life style. Maybe we should have said, no, come join us. Be citizens along with the rest of us.”<sup>439</sup>

Reagan’s talk of “humoring” Native Americans on “preservations” was revealing. It was Reagan, after all, who first vetoed major Indian health-care legislation, then cut the existing services by 13%. Even during the years of economic growth, his appointees reduced federal appropriations for housing, education and legal aid with overall expenditures—dropping 18% between 1982 and 1984 alone. The smiling President also appeared unaware of the fact that Native Americans had been citizens of the United States since 1924.<sup>440</sup>

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<sup>439</sup> Ronald Reagan: “Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session With the Students and Faculty at Moscow State University,” May 31, 1988. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=35897> (accessed 13 March 2012).

<sup>440</sup> Michael Dorris, “The Cowboy and the Indians: Reagan’s Patronizing Remarks Add Insult to Injury,” *Los Angeles Times*, Vol. 107 (June 12, 1988): 5, online article; Sarah Deutsch, George J. Sánchez, and Gary Y. Okihiro, “Contemporary People/ Contested Spaces,” In *The Oxford History of the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994): 661.



Reagan's ignorance of the past, frontier imaginings, and, more broadly, his anti-intellectual streak on a wide range of issues extending beyond race relations was picked up on by numerous editorial cartoonists. During the 1980s, dozens of political cartoons portray Reagan as clueless but, interestingly, a majority of the public—minorities and liberals being two notable exceptions—did not seem to care, they liked him anyway. Early depictions of the Reagan Library feature books opened to empty pages and another showing Reagan himself at the Presidential Library's reference desk with just his own memoirs and a Zane Grey novel in the spacious otherwise empty shelves behind him.<sup>441</sup> A 1988 Bruce Beattie cartoon portrays a befuddled but still mounted Cowboy Reagan riding off into the sunset in the wrong direction ("Uh, Ron, the sunset you're supposed to ride off into is THAT way...").<sup>442</sup>

But though RR may have been short on smarts he is still typically envisioned as tall in the saddle. For most Commanders in Chief, Reagan's perceived "reality gap" would have caused serious harm but as former Johnson aide turned journalist Bill Moyers wryly observed: "We didn't elect this guy because he knows how many barrels of oil there are in Alaska. We elected him because he makes us feel good."<sup>443</sup>

### **"Bonanza" Economics, Taxes and Deficits**

The conservative revision of the Frontier Myth also provided fuel for the Republican President's references to "bonanza economics"—not through the tapping of

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<sup>441</sup> Reagan Library cartoons by Paul Conrad, *Los Angeles Times* on February 17, 1991 and from *The Evening Sun* (cartoonist cannot be identified) appear in RRPL, Newspaper Clippings Files, "Ronald Reagan Presidential Library-Museum, 1989-1993."

<sup>442</sup> Bruce Beattie, *Daytona Beach News Journal*, 1988, reprinted in Della J. Attisani, *A Power Beyond Words: An Examination of the Rhetoric of Cartoon Art about Ronald Reagan*. MA Thesis, Florida Atlantic University, August 1996: 146.

<sup>443</sup> Bill Moyers quoted in Michael Schaller, *Reckoning with Reagan: America and Its President in the 1980s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992): 5.

abundant resources on a new physical frontier but rather through the magic of supply-side Reaganomics combined with the call for a revival of the nation's spirit. Reagan's campaign praised the bonanzas of previous "boom" eras and now it was his intention to revive a "cowboy economy" in a post-industrial age. The Reaganites hoped to use the manipulation of capital as a replacement for agricultural and industrial production to drive the nation's economic recovery. Through deregulation and tax cuts, especially for the wealthy, Reagan claimed that a "bonanza" of new capital would guarantee a constant and painless economic growth—that "with a rising tide" all boats would float (just as the Frontier Myth alleged that even "the little guy" benefitted from wealth creation).<sup>444</sup> This, the supply-side President explained, would work in the same way that opening up "vast...untapped wealth" out West—including agricultural lands, oil and gold—had driven the economy in the past.<sup>445</sup> As Reagan phrased it, when signing the 1982 St. Germain/Garn bill which deregulated the savings and loan industry: "All in all, I think we've hit the jackpot."<sup>446</sup> Reagan offered further reassurances in his second Inaugural address in 1985. Once again, as in their glorious past, Americans were told that they were living in a world without limits: "We believed then and now: There are no limits to growth and human progress when men and women are free to follow their dreams."<sup>447</sup> Here Reagan delivered the optimistic old frontier "bonanza" idea all over again which

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<sup>444</sup> Ronald Reagan: "Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session With State and Local Officials During a White House Briefing on the Program for Economic Recovery," May 28, 1981. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=43867> (accessed 19 September 2014).

<sup>445</sup> Ronald Reagan: "Message to the Congress Submitting the National Materials and Minerals Program Plan and Report," April 5, 1982. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=42363> (accessed 19 September 2014).

<sup>446</sup> Reagan's "jackpot" quotation in Steven Waldman and Rich Thomas, "How Did It Happen?" *Newsweek*, Vol. 115, No. 21 (May 21, 1990): 27-28.

<sup>447</sup> Ronald Reagan: "Inaugural Address," January 21, 1985. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=38688> (accessed November 14, 2011).

was received to cheering ovations as he, like Turner, gave expression to the intense wishes of the nation. The Frontier Myth of the Reagan years inspired deregulation in banking and industry in a big way: a change that would come back to haunt Reagan's heir George H.W. Bush a few years down the road.

In the popular mind, Americans had conquered the untamed West and with the same adventurous spirit Reaganites believed they would emerge triumphant in the face of contemporary challenges as well. As Reagan closed the Inaugural speech, facing westward from the Capitol Building for the first time in history (in a deliberate symbolic gesture), he told Americans that "at the steps of this symbol of democracy...we see and hear again the echoes of our past: the men of the Alamo call out encouragement to each other; a settler pushes west and sings a song, and the song echoes out forever and fills the unknowing air. It is the American sound. We sing it still....we are together as of old."<sup>448</sup> Reagan thus tied together the past, present and the future as he called upon Americans to dedicate themselves to living out this story. For the President, the attributes of the past could help Americans triumph economically, socially and politically over their challenges in the present. Reagan's nostalgia promoted a comfortable, mythic referent to a past place and time that no longer existed—if it ever had. And unlike Lyndon Johnson and in many respects TR, who viewed history with a sense of continuity and progression, Reagan's backward thinking of the Frontier West "as it ought to have been" discouraged this continuity.

In keeping with the line of his fellow conservatives and the new conventional "frontier" wisdom, Reagan also believed that the Federal Government tried to do too

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<sup>448</sup> Ronald Reagan: "Inaugural Address," January 21, 1985. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=38688>> (accessed February 23, 2012).

many things, spent too much money, and over-regulated. His champion, Calvin Coolidge, might have found many places to cut spending but Reagan had a tougher time since by the late twentieth century various New Deal and Great Society programs, such as Social Security and Medicare, remained popular. His biggest cuts to social programs were in the areas of Medicaid, food stamps, aid to families with dependent children and other programs which were especially vital to lower-income families.<sup>449</sup>

Tax cuts were the most touted feature of the Reaganomics program. During the hyper-inflation of the 1970s, millions of Americans saw their incomes rise but their purchasing power stay the same; meanwhile, their taxes kept increasing. Much of the public was angry as dozens of states began slashing property and state income taxes. Reagan's 1981 Economic Recovery Tax Act—signed at a heavily hyped event for the press at *Rancho del Cielo*—offered a broad array of tax concessions, including a 25 percent across the board tax cut and a lowering of the maximum rate from 70 to 50 percent for 1982. Before long, however, Reagan discovered that there was not enough waste and fraud to make the substantial budget cuts that he had promised so easily during the campaign.<sup>450</sup> Tax cuts were followed with tax increases, which the President slickly referred to as “revenue enhancers,”<sup>451</sup> and his frequently repeated promise to shrink government did not occur. The tripling of the national debt from 1980 to 1989 was primarily the result of Reagan keeping his word on defense spending as he demanded and got Congressional approval for more than \$2 trillion dollars in defense

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<sup>449</sup> See Eric Pianin and Thomas B. Edsall, “Schisms From [Reagan] Administration Lingered for Years,” *Washington Post*, June 9, 2004, A01.

<sup>450</sup> David R. Farber, *The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism: A Short History* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010): 195, 198.

<sup>451</sup> Richard Reeves, *President Reagan: The Triumph of Imagination* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005): 122.

spending.<sup>452</sup> In 1983, even when unemployment reached more than 10 percent and the economy looked as if it were about to plunge over a cliff, Reagan insisted that the country stay the course. “Our government is too big and it spends too much,”<sup>453</sup> he would continue to say as if defense expenditures did not count. Then in late 1983 and 1984, a dramatic economic recovery arrived as inflation plunged from 11 percent down to 2 percent, unemployment dropped to 7.5 percent, and annual growth accelerated to 7.2 percent <sup>454</sup>—enabling a president who once appeared to be in “phaseout” mode to win with the largest popular majority of the vote since LBJ in 1964. “The sour economy is the fault of Jimmy Carter,” Reagan said repeatedly;<sup>455</sup> by employing these phrases consistently over time he effectively etched blame on the Democrats in the public mind and had set himself up for the credit when things turned around. Reagan was able to pursue his feeling good *Morning in America* campaign in 1984—projecting a return to glory years past— and winning a landslide re-election victory in the process. By the end of his administration, Reagan had in reality expanded the federal payroll and created a huge debt which would trip up his successor George H.W. Bush. But none of this mattered at the time: the *perception* of much of the American public was that Reagan was promoting greater individualism, independence and self-reliance through tax cuts and alleged reductions in federal spending and this served to tie his image even more closely to the neo-conservative “frontiers” of the 1980s.

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<sup>452</sup> ushistory.org, “Reaganomics,” *US History Online*, Access: <http://www.ushistory.org/us/596.asp> (accessed 21 October 2014).

<sup>453</sup> Reagan quotation in Rick Perlstein, “What Would Ronnie Do?” *Newsweek*, Vol. 157, No.5 (January 31, 2011): 27.

<sup>454</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>455</sup> Reagan quotation in *Ibid.*



**Figure 9.2: President Reagan and a Buffalo Bill Cody look-alike link the Republicans' promotion of conservative "Budget Reform" with the Frontier Myth.** (Courtesy Ronald Reagan Library, White House Photograph Collection, North Platte, Nebraska, August 13, 1987, Roll C42192, Frame 6)

Reagan's constant talk of less government, reduced spending and less intrusion was also a case of perception over reality in relation to a favourite old theme of Ronald Reagan's, "law and order," which was spun with much effectiveness by his handlers in 1980 and throughout his presidency. After "Sheriff" Reagan took office and started appointing conservative judges who emphasized punishment over rehabilitation, the length of prison sentences increased substantially. In part as a result of these initiatives against domestic outlaws, the number of prisoners in the US prison system has risen dramatically ever since from 500,000 in 1980 to 1.5 million in 1994<sup>456</sup> to 2.3 million

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<sup>456</sup> Elaine B. Sharp, *The Sometime Connection: Public Opinion and Social Policy* (Syracuse, NY: SUNY Press, 1999): 39.

today—the highest rate of incarceration in the developed world.<sup>457</sup> “We put criminals on notice,” Reagan told Americans. “We said: make one false move, and the next sound you hear is the clang of a jail cell door slamming shut.”<sup>458</sup> In the words of Dirty Harry, the President often liked to tell criminals: “You’re out of luck.”<sup>459</sup> Another ironic twist of the Eighties frontier vision, however, is that in combining the “rugged individualism” theme that Reagan accepted as a key defining characteristic of the nation with his unwavering insistence on stability and order, Reagan stirred up a strange brew which could only be realized through the costly expansion of the US Federal prison system. Defense spending and issues such as incarceration served to send the nation’s debt through the roof.

Many conservatives tipped their hats to bureaucrat bashing Ronnie R., their Western frontier hero. But the former B-movie actor’s opponents used the cowboy/frontier image frequently as well, attacking Reagan’s “cowboy capitalism” of cutting taxes; firing and deregulating air traffic controllers, banking, and environmental codes; cutting public assistance programs and Head Start; dramatically increasing military spending; expanding the prison system; and pushing budget proposals that appeared regionally biased in favour of the West.

Reagan had long characterized “tax and spend” Democrats as outlaws who had looted America of its wealth and vitality. In the context of the 1980s, many Americans had come to accept this explanation. But, in the end, opponents charged that his wild

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<sup>457</sup> National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), “Criminal Justice Fact Sheet,” online: <http://www.naACP.org/pages/criminal-justice-fact-sheet> (accessed 14 November 2014).

<sup>458</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at a Republican Campaign Rally in Mesquite, Texas,” November 5, 1988. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *Public Papers of the Presidents, The American Presidency Project*. <<http://www.Reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1988/110588c.htm>> (accessed July 13, 2011).

<sup>459</sup> Ronald Reagan: “Remarks at the Presentation Ceremony for the Take Pride in America Awards,” July 26, 1988. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=36156> (accessed 19 September 2014).

“borrow and spend” Republican bunch with its gigantic military buildup would create the largest peacetime deficits in history and a huge national debt that would take generations of Americans to pay off.<sup>460</sup> The legacy of Reagan’s decision to deregulate also received a rough ride, especially in the years directly following his final term office. While in the short run deregulation may have worked to promote economic growth in some areas of the US economy, these gains were likely more than offset by the Savings and Loans bailout of 1989-1995.

Scholarship has shown that the Savings and Loan Crisis, a direct result of the Reagan Administration’s deregulation campaign, created what one observer has described as “the single greatest regulatory lapse of this century”—causing the federal government to spend \$250 billion to cover losses, an amount approaching the total cost of the Vietnam War.<sup>461</sup> As Professor Michael Mendelbaum described him in the journal *Foreign Affairs*, Reagan was viewed by opponents as “ill equipped for the responsibility that he bears, a kind of cowboy figure, bellicose, ignorant, with a simplistic view of the world pieced together from the journals of right-wing opinion and old Hollywood movies.”<sup>462</sup> For Reagan and his supporters, the President’s connection with the Frontier Myth and the cowboy was a political statement and a powerful symbol that could be used to disarm his detractors by suggesting, if not stating directly, that opposition to Reaganism was somehow less “American.” For liberals on the other hand—and in a sad turn for proponents of a liberal take on the Frontier Myth—Reagan’s close association

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<sup>460</sup> In May 1988, before President Reagan had left office, the *National Journal* published a full length issue on the Reagan presidency giving the administration a “D for deficits” and stating bluntly that “supply-side economics had failed.” In many respects, the article insisted, unemployment and control over government spending would have fared much better had the nation stayed with Jimmy Carter. The *Journal* article is quoted from and described in Reeves, *President Reagan*, 458-459.

<sup>461</sup> S & L figures appear in Steven Waldman and Rich Thomas, “How Did It Happen?” *Newsweek*, Vol. 115, No. 21 (May 21, 1990): 27-28.

<sup>462</sup> Michael Mandelbaum, “American Policy: The Luck of the President,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 64 (1985): 406.



with black hat villains (as opposed to heroes), conservative ideology, and the frontier would further weaken their own positive associations with the Frontier Myth, and cause them to turn increasingly away from and even against the myth and symbolism of the frontier as a way of representing their own liberal causes. A point we shall return to in Chapter X.

### **Reagan on the International Stage**

During the 1980 campaign, many Europeans and some Americans as well, expressed fears that “nuclear cowboy” Ronald Reagan would make at least as trigger happy a Commander in Chief of America’s nuclear arsenal as Barry Goldwater would have. In London, an updated version of political satirist Tom Lehrer’s 1965 classic recording *Who’s Next?*, Lehrer nervously asserted: “We’ll try to stay serene and calm/ When Ronald Reagan gets the Bomb.” Cartoons in France, meanwhile, depicted “Ronnie *le Cowboy*” as Major Kong from the 1964 Stanley Kubrick film *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, cheerfully riding a nuke (as opposed to the mad LBJ cartoon) while wildly waving his Stetson.<sup>463</sup>

Reagan’s handlers responded. In a confidential memo from 1980 campaign strategist Richard Wirthlin to Reagan, Bush and their senior campaign directors, a strategy was proposed in response to the Reagan as “too quick to push the nuclear button” issue that he hoped would at least allay fears of the American voter (the memory of the Goldwater disaster in 1964 explains the urgency here). Wirthlin’s recommendations were followed to the letter.<sup>464</sup> In his two TV ads on the topic of

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<sup>463</sup> William Safire, “Ronnie *Le Cowboy*,” *New York Times* (June 16, 1980): A23; *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), Columbia Pictures, Dir: Stanley Kubrick.

<sup>464</sup> RRPL, Reagan, Ronald: 1980 Campaign Papers 1965-1980, Series III: Ed Meese Files – Campaign Operations, Box 110, “Meese, Ed – Campaign Operations – Reagan for President [General]”

“Peace,” Reagan puts on the hat of the responsible cowboy, reminiscent of LBJ in 1964, but also reminds Americans that “History has taught us only too well that tyrants are tempted only when the forces of freedom are weak, not when they are strong,” uses the exact “gentle” phrasing found in his strategist’s memo (replacing common Reagan-Bush phrases such as “defense posture” with “peace posture”), and concludes the lengthier of the two spots with: “Peace is our dream...and I pledge to you that, as your President, of all the objectives we seek, first and foremost will be the establishment of world peace.”<sup>465</sup> While preserving Reagan’s hawkish “tough on tyrants” image, it appears clear that his team was determined not to make the same miscalculations that the Goldwaterites had 16 years earlier.

Throughout his two terms in the White House, Reagan offered a “peace through strength” philosophy and massive military build-up reminiscent of TR’s “big stick” philosophy that a majority of Americans of the 1980s era apparently longed for. As the arch-enemy of communism and champion of American supremacy, Reagan used words and symbolism which “evoked a powerful belief that the past that never was could not only be restored but would secure America’s role as ‘number one’ in the world.”<sup>466</sup> The powerful idea of American exceptionalism, superiority as a civilization, and unlimited potential was alive and well in the Reagan years—only this time it was big business and not the federal government that promised to fulfill the nation’s frontier destinies.

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file, Memorandum from Richard B. Wirthlin to Governor Reagan, Ambassador Bush, Senator Laxalt, Ambassador Armstrong, William Casey and Deputy Campaign Directors, Reagan Bush Committee, August 9, 1980, “Focused Impact Theme: Foreign Affairs.”

<sup>465</sup> RRPL, Reagan, Ronald: 1980 Campaign Papers 1965-1980, Series V: Media, Promotion, Advertising (Dailey)—Media Campaign Speeches 9/1980, Box 228, “Media Campaign (Peter Dailey)—[Spots-Scripts-Television Commercials] (2/2), “Peace” Television Commercials, QRRB 0193 and 0105, September 2, 1980.

<sup>466</sup> Quotation from historian Michael Schaller, *Reckoning with Reagan*, 181.

In 1983, Reagan sent the American military in like the gun toting heroes of the *Magnificent Seven* to liberate Grenada—the smallest independent country in the Western hemisphere—on the justification of rooting out communist Cubans held up in government offices and schools. According to White House sources, the Marines aided defenseless settlers against “a brutal gang of thugs.”<sup>467</sup> Reagan told Americans that the tiny island nation “was a Soviet-Cuban colony being readied as a major military bastion to export terror and undermine democracy. We got there just in time.”<sup>468</sup> While a secret CIA report later concluded that Reagan’s assessment was grossly inaccurate and that little may have been accomplished in real terms, the Americans were at long last victorious. The shame of the Vietnam debacle could be erased, Reaganites seem to have believed, through their own President’s “splendid little war.”<sup>469</sup> Grenada, though tiny, was a frontier that was conquered quickly and decisively thereby feeding Reagan’s message of reassurance and bringing back the frontier mythic America that regarded itself as a nation of winners.

## **Soviet Outlaws**

Cowboy Reagan faced several non-Communist “troublemakers” during his White House years, including that “mad dog of the Middle East” Libya’s Colonel Muammar Khadafi, but no enemy was nearly as lethal or troubling to Reagan or most other Americans as the Soviet Union. Having been strongly influenced by his own frontier

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<sup>467</sup> Reagan “thugs” quotation in Michael Schaller, *Ronald Reagan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011): 68.

<sup>468</sup> Ronald Reagan: “Address to the Nation on Events in Lebanon and Grenada,” October 27, 1983. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=40696> (accessed March 3, 2012); Herbert S. Parmet, *George Bush: The Life of a Lone Star Yankee* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, r2001): 284.

<sup>469</sup> Herbert S. Parmet, *George Bush: The Life of a Lone Star Yankee* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, r2001): 284.

vision, including his belief in the necessity of individual liberty in a free society, Reagan not only railed about Soviet power but abhorred what he envisioned as the entire 'cradle to grave' Soviet way of life. Holding on to his frontier visions of an earlier age, the President repeatedly counterpoised his idealized images of an older America—with its alleged simple truths of individualism, self-reliance, know-how and higher values—against the negative images of modern life in Soviet Russia. In fact, up until the thaw with Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev in the mid to late 1980s, virtually *all* of the public descriptions that Reagan offered of the Soviets were negative and nasty. According to Robert Ivie, "The Soviet Union is depicted [by Reagan] as a 'Natural Menace,' as animals, primitives, machines, criminals, mentally disturbed, as fanatics and ideologues, and as satanic and profane."<sup>470</sup> Globally, the Soviets' skulduggery and America's own weakness (due to Carter's administration) was said to be responsible for *every* unfortunate turn of events—from Grenada to the attack on the Beirut Marine barracks in Lebanon and, in particular, the "Korean Airlines Massacre." Dating back to the 1960s, Reagan had never equated "grim" liberals<sup>471</sup> with Communists but his depiction of an increasingly government controlled nation would supposedly leave the differences between the US and USSR so marginal that foolish appeasement and accommodation with the Reds would be the only course.

As the champion of conservative frontier values and the enemy of Communism—and its postwar association with enormous concentrations of state power—the white hat Reagan (initially) hated the idea of détente with the duplicitous, black-hatted Soviets.

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<sup>470</sup> Robert Ivie quoted in Craig Allen Smith, "Mister Reagan's Neighborhood: Rhetoric and National Unity," *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, Vol. 52 (1987): 227.

<sup>471</sup> George F. Will, "Smile if (and Only if) You're Conservative," *Washington Post*, (23 February 2006), online at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/22/AR2006022202012.html> (accessed 14 November 2014).

“Detente,” he would say, “isn’t that what a farmer has with his turkey, until Thanksgiving Day?”<sup>472</sup> Reagan did not trust the Soviets, thought that his predecessor presidents had enabled Red power and global reach to increase, and was determined to counter it with a massive military buildup and a war of words. In his often quoted speech to the National Association of Evangelicals in 1983, Reagan warned of the Soviet enemy: “Let us be aware that while they preach the supremacy of the state, declare its omnipotence over individual man, and predict its eventual domination of all peoples on the Earth, they are the focus of evil in the modern world.” Reagan continued: “I urge you to beware the temptation...to ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of any evil empire, to simply call the arms race a giant misunderstanding and thereby remove yourself from the struggle between right and wrong, good and evil.”<sup>473</sup>

During his first few years in office, Reagan pulled no punches—listing alleged Soviet crimes against humanity at every opportunity.<sup>474</sup> The era of gentler diplomacy was over and a period of intense anti-communist rhetoric, military buildups and “freedom fighter” activities in the third world was in as Gunfighter Reagan and his followers hoped that one day, as in the Hollywood world of the Old West, Brezhnev and his gang would get the drubbing they deserved (Figure 9.3).

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<sup>472</sup> Reagan turkey quote in Farber, *The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism*, 200.

<sup>473</sup> Ronald Reagan: "Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida," March 8, 1983. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=41023> (accessed June 5, 2012).

<sup>474</sup> Most famously, Reagan listed off examples of Soviet crimes in: Ronald Reagan: "Address to the Nation on the Soviet Attack on a Korean Civilian Airliner," September 5, 1983. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=41788> (accessed 23 October 2014); and his original “Evil Empire” speech delivered in London - Ronald Reagan: "Address to Members of the British Parliament," June 8, 1982. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=42614> (accessed 23 October, 2014).



**Figure 9.3: *Bedtime for Brezhnev*: An early achievement of the Reagan presidency this widely viewed poster helped transform Reagan's alleged "cowboy" credentials from a humorous popular culture concoction of "B" westerns and chimp-comedies into a persona that perfectly matched the renewed and revised version of the American Frontier Myth. (2010.54.19402. Unknown Artist. *Bedtime for Brezhnev*, 1981. Poster, 18 x 27 in. Collection of the Oakland Museum of California. All Of Us Or None Archive. Gift of the Rossman Family)**

Reagan metaphorically confronted the evil Reds in a 1984 re-election campaign TV ad portraying the Soviet threat as "a bear in the woods": a piece that members of the Boone and Crockett Club might have admired. Here a grizzly bear is seen moving, slowly, ominously through the underbrush and across a stream. A friendly voiceover favoring Reagan's candidacy asks: "There's a bear in the woods....Isn't it smart to be as strong as the bear?" At the end of the ad, a faceless, rifle toting hunter in the same woods stands tall on a hill as the bear approaches; the beast stops, hesitates and timidly steps backwards. The fantasy imagery is clear: Ronald Reagan is the armed and ready



guardian gunslinger or pioneer who, on the international frontier, will confront the Soviet bear and keep the American nation safe.<sup>475</sup>

## **A Silver Bullet**

Ronald Reagan's whole hearted acceptance of a particular expression of the Frontier Myth and his calls for a restoration of the simple truths of the past also informed national policies such as the highly ambitious, and expensive, Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) or "Star Wars" program. Having been proposed just two weeks after the President would deliver his famous "Evil Empire" speech about the Soviet Union in 1982, the project would fulfill his image requirement that a single hero, or in this case a hero nation, would save the day by raising a "space shield" which enemy missiles could not penetrate. Here the Reagan Administration shifted the frontier scene from finite land to infinite space. As Garry Wills points out in *Reagan's America: Innocents at Home*, to Reagan and a large segment of the American public SDI was "much like the Lone Ranger's silver bullet which he used only to knock guns out of the bad guy's hands."<sup>476</sup> And unlike Jimmy Carter, who had allegedly allowed American frontiers to diminish and shrank the sphere of American influence by ceding the Panama Canal without even unbuckling his holster, Reagan's "Star Wars" program (like JFK and LBJ's Apollo missions) promised the nation that a "New Frontier" was out there for Americans to master...in space. The President saw the possibility of using a scientific future to return America to its *Edenic* past: a time before nuclear weapons threatened the existence of the planet.

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<sup>475</sup> "The Bear" or "President Reagan: Prepared for Peace" TV ad from the 1984 campaign can be viewed on YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NpwdcmjBgNA> (accessed February 22, 2012).

<sup>476</sup> Wills, *Reagan's America: Innocents at Home*, 360.

Thus, the Reagan vision was once again restorative. In his SDI speech, his challenge to science even contained a kind of sacred element: "I call upon the scientific community in our country, those who gave us nuclear weapons, to turn their great talents now to the cause of mankind and world peace, to give us a means of rendering these weapons impotent and obsolete."<sup>477</sup> Scientists were, in effect, being given a chance to atone for their Original Sin by conquering a new challenge. As the *New Republic* put it: "In classic Reagan style, he offered a simple, clear and hopeful vision: a shining city on a hill—with a moat."<sup>478</sup> In doing so, Reagan was also marshalling support for the project through the same kind of can-do optimism that Billington has identified as part and parcel of the Frontier Myth.<sup>479</sup>

Just as Turner had described the American frontier as a "safety valve" for the exhaustion and pollution of the old world in the East, now unexplored spaces in the universe needed to be found for Americans to maintain their unique identity as a nation of pioneers. The idea of a mystique and lure of unknown frontiers and myth of an exceptional American pioneering spirit was laid on thick in an advertisement sponsored by the Coalition for the Strategic Defense Initiative which appeared in *USA Today*. The commercial was formatted as a giant thank you letter addressed to "Mr. President" and stated, among other things, that:

You have unleashed a surge of technological advance in the U.S. and in the rest of the Free World which will not only solve the problems of strategic defense, but will also open up space to tap its unlimited resources and

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<sup>477</sup> Ronald Reagan: "Address to the Nation on Defense and National Security," March 23, 1983. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=41093> (accessed February 21, 2012).

<sup>478</sup> Charles Krauthammer, "The Illusion of Star Wars: The Worst Offense is a Bad Defense," *The New Republic*, Vol. 190 (May 14, 1984): 13.

<sup>479</sup> Ray Allen Billington and Martin Ridge, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press): 123, 389.



energy and its unique manufacturing environment for the good of mankind.

You have made it possible that in the year 1992, 500 years after Columbus opened up the frontiers of the New World, the U.S. and its Free World allies will open up the high frontier of space for our security and our prosperity as spacefaring nations. Free enterprise investment in space systems demands long term security be provided, and SDI is an essential first step in that direction.

Get our children out from under the nuclear Sword of Damocles. Free men for centuries will never forget your role in delivering them from the nuclear balance of terror.<sup>480</sup>

Here we see Reaganites' rhetorical removal of what had been a technological horror, or the "the nuclear Sword of Damocles," so that Americans might once again take up their frontiering odyssey for centuries to come. It is essentially an expansion of the revised Frontier Myth structure replete, though not stated explicitly here, with bad guys (or more specifically, the weapons of the non-"free" powers) for the heroic and exceptional frontier nation to subdue and destroy. Reagan's solution, once again, implies a return to the "good old days" only this time it was through an ideal projected future based on the lessons and values of the past.

Both Reagan and Lyndon Johnson had employed frontier symbolism in their equating of leadership in space with security interests. But while Johnson had emphasized this outer space extension of the "frontiers of freedom" as one that would facilitate adoption and change—enabling American society to become freer, fairer, more inclusive and more democratic—Reagan's supporters characteristically linked the proposed SDI adventure with "free enterprise investment" that could tap into the

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<sup>480</sup> *USA Today* advertisement excerpts appear in Krauthammer, "The Illusion of Star Wars," 424.

cosmos' "unlimited resources and energy and unique manufacturing environment."<sup>481</sup> The Final Frontier had taken a hard turn to the right since the days of JFK and LBJ and was now being viewed less as a venture in change and growth politically and socially, than as a cause for investment optimism.

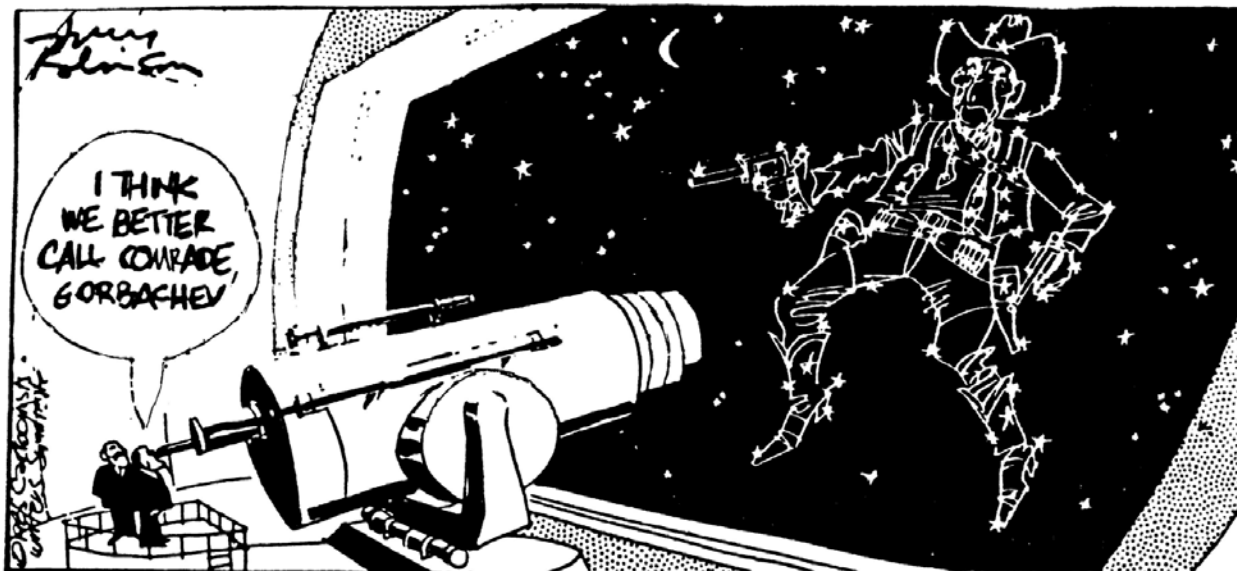
Not everyone was excited about the plans for "Star Wars." Critics charged that the \$26(+) billion dollar project was unfeasible (it never did make it out of the research stages) and that the Soviets would have the last laugh when America went broke trying to build the elaborate contraption.<sup>482</sup> Reagan's Frontier connections and heroic cowboy persona, however, appeared to offer further grist in support of SDI. A 1986 cartoon portrayal of the President by Jerry Robinson depicts the Star Wars initiative as a constellation in the shape of Reagan as a cowboy with his cocked pistol drawn—the frontier sheriff facing down the villains (Figure 9.4). Two Russian astronomers with a huge telescope look tiny compared to the gun-toting and fearless Reagan. One of the Soviet scientists says to the other, "I Think We Better Call Comrade Gorbachev." This six-gun Reagan has compelled the Reds to understand that they no longer face a wobbly-legged adversary. Even in cartoon form, we observe that Reagan the space-gunfighter is self-reliant, aggressive, and a true believer in manifest destiny. Robinson's work is a kind of comical fulfillment of one of the Reagan campaign's feature rallying cries: "America is back!"<sup>483</sup>

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<sup>481</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>482</sup> In a counter thrust to Jerry Robinson's work (below), Lambert Der later published a cartoon with Gorbachev appearing as Darth Vader and Reagan as Luke Skywalker: their arms embraced around one another. Though there is no caption the message is clear enough. While Gorbachev's cheery face (as he holds Darth Vader's mask in his left hand) appears normal, even flattering, Reagan's Skywalker is severely caricatured as a mush-headed simpleton. Lambert Der cartoon, *Greenville (S.C.) News*, 1989, republished in Attisani, *A Power Beyond Words*, 136.

<sup>483</sup> Jerry Robinson cartoon reprinted in *Ibid*, 145.



**Figure 9.4:** (Cartoon by Jerry Robinson, 1985. Permission granted by Janice Robinson, Cartoonists and Writers Syndicate)

In the meantime, NASA would continue to play off the popular connection of the past with the future and the idea that technology itself was a kind of frontier through its familiar naming of extraterrestrial exploration craft: *Mariner*, *Voyager*, *Pioneer*, and *Viking*. All employed the Frontier Myth to resonate with the public and to add appeal to its budget requests. During the Reagan period, though, much of the emphasis was on space as an arena for commercial enterprises.

### **The “Reasonable” Cowboy Conservative**

A number of events appear to have come together in the late summer and early fall of 1983 which forced Ronald Reagan to rethink and reshape his own ideas about the Frontier Myth, specifically in the context of America’s Cold War confrontation with the USSR. The shooting down of Korean Airlines Flight 007 by the Soviets on September 1,

1983, was the first of these and, as historian Beth Fisher has asserted,<sup>484</sup> hit home to Reagan the possibility that a human error could bring about nuclear annihilation. Reagan later wrote in his memoirs that “If mistakes could be made by a fighter pilot, what about a similar miscalculation by the commander of a missile launch crew?”<sup>485</sup> Reagan became even more deeply affected after watching the ABC made-for-TV movie *The Day After* in October. The story, depicting what would happen if there were a nuclear attack on Lawrence, Kansas, stunned Reagan—he wrote in his diary that: “It’s very effective & left me greatly depressed....My own reaction was...to see there is never a nuclear war.”<sup>486</sup> The movie had demonstrated to Reagan (through the medium which appears to have most influenced him)<sup>487</sup> that nuclear war could never be won by either side. And it had done so in a visual story about ordinary Americans which, like the tales of the Frontier Myth, was “especially well-suited to Reagan’s intellect.”<sup>488</sup> At what Reagan described as a “sobering” Pentagon briefing just days after viewing *The Day After*, he was told that nuclear war was winnable. “I thought they were crazy,” the President wrote. “Worse, it appeared there were also Soviet generals who thought in terms of winning a nuclear war.”<sup>489</sup> With scenes of nuclear annihilation fresh in his mind, Reagan likened the Pentagon briefing to the movie, *The Day After*.<sup>490</sup> Adding further to Reagan’s anxieties, in November he learned that the Soviets had become unglued during a NATO war game, thinking it was a real attack, and had seriously

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<sup>484</sup> See Beth A. Fischer, *The Reagan Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War* (Columbia MO: University of Missouri Press, 1997).

<sup>485</sup> Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990): 584.

<sup>486</sup> Ronald Reagan, edited by Douglas Brinkley, *The Reagan Diaries* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007): 186 [from Reagan’s entry for Monday, October 10, 1983].

<sup>487</sup> The power of film in influencing and informing Ronald Reagan was explored in *CNN Report, “Secret Video Briefings for President Reagan: CIA Found Novel Way to Brief Ex-Actor.”* CNN Report by Jill Dougherty, aired November 10, 2011.

<sup>488</sup> Fischer, *The Reagan Reversal*, 118.

<sup>489</sup> Reagan, *An American Life*, 586.

<sup>490</sup> Fischer, *The Reagan Reversal*, 121.

considered ordering a pre-emptive nuclear strike on the U.S.<sup>491</sup> Reagan expressed his shock that Soviet leaders genuinely feared an American nuclear attack and pondered whether his own rhetoric might have contributed to this dangerous perception.<sup>492</sup>

*The Day After* movie, and all of the surrounding events of this period, were pivotal in Reagan's life and political career and apparently caused him to reassess his policy approach to the Soviets. With the threat of nuclear annihilation now at or near the top of his agenda, the former "nuclear cowboy" (who, as Governor, once boasted that an atomized North Vietnam could be paved over as a parking lot)<sup>493</sup> now became an advocate not only of reductions but of the *elimination* of nuclear weapons. Reagan wrote seven years after these events: "As long as nuclear weapons were in existence, there would always be risks they would be used, and once the first weapon was unleashed, who knew where it would end? My dream, then, became a world free of nuclear weapons."<sup>494</sup> Though he wrote these words in hindsight, his actions at the time are also demonstrative of a shift away from his adherence to a gunslinger stance against the USSR toward a reasonable and more conciliatory "trust but verify" cowboy. A reoriented Cowboy Reagan would attempt to make peace with his enemies for the common good rather than the hardliner, hawkish approach of attempting to stare them down on a dusty, deserted street. Indeed, for Reagan, the postwar doctrine of mutually assured destruction (MAD) was now identified with "madness." In terms that adherents to the Frontier Myth could well understand, Reagan likened MAD to "two westerners

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<sup>491</sup> Farber, *The Rise and Fall of American Conservatism*, 204.

<sup>492</sup> Ronald E. Powaski, *Return to Armageddon: The United States and the Nuclear Arms Race, 1981-1999* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000): 40.

<sup>493</sup> Reagan paraphrased from Murray, "The Rise of Ronald Reagan," 19.

<sup>494</sup> Reagan, *An American Life*, 550.

standing in a saloon aiming their guns at each other's head—permanently.”<sup>495</sup> Reagan, then, was rethinking and to some degree redesigning the structures of the Frontier Myth. And he was not alone. Stanley Feldman and Lee Sigelman's research has demonstrated that after watching, *The Day After*, the issue of nuclear war came much more to the forefront in the minds of millions of other Americans as well who sought additional information on the issue from the print media in particular. Feldman and Sigelman also found that “The more news stories about nuclear war one watched or read, the more likely one was to move toward a more conciliatory approach to U.S.-Soviet relations. This is a powerful effect.”<sup>496</sup> Events, the popular media and two powerful world leaders would collectively cause precisely the kind shifts in the Frontier Myth's Cold War mentality that Marshall Sahlins challenges us to look for.

A shift in Reagan's public tone towards the Soviets was noticeable and would intensify with time. At a press conference prior to his September 1984 meeting with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, Reagan was asked: “Do you think this meeting will help people come to your way of thinking; that you're not the trigger-happy cowboy you say people like to portray you as?” The President responded, “Well, the most important thing is what understanding I can reach with Foreign Minister Gromyko to maybe convince him that the United States means no harm.”<sup>497</sup> But the real change came after Mikhail Gorbachev became the leader of the USSR. In 1987, Premier Gorbachev told Reagan he was willing to make a deal on a medium-range missile treaty

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<sup>495</sup> *Ibid*, 547.

<sup>496</sup> Stanley Feldman and Lee Sigelman, “The Political Impact of Prime-Time Television: ‘The Day After,’” *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (June 1985): 571.

<sup>497</sup> Ronald Reagan: “Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session With Reporters on a Meeting With Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko,” September 11, 1984. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=40357> (accessed 13 March 2012).

and, to the horror of many of his conservative advisors (but encouraged by Nancy and Secretary of State George Schultz), Reagan reached back.<sup>498</sup> In Washington on December 9<sup>th</sup> Reagan and Gorbachev signed a treaty to eliminate intermediate range nuclear forces. It was an epochal event that led to the eventual end of the arms race altogether. Hard-line conservative hawks were convinced, however, that their President had been royally duped and that only the fall of the USSR could genuinely turn things around.<sup>499</sup> But Reagan could no longer abide by the “showdown” mentality; instead he took on the persona of the tough but reasonable cowboy whose foreign policy now placed the prevention of a catastrophic war at or near the top of the agenda.

Toward the end of Reagan’s time in office, in New Years of 1988, the *Washington Post* pondered: “What a strange nuclear place Ronald Reagan has brought himself and the rest of us to” as “the mad bomber of the West” of just a few years before had been replaced with a President who accepted nuclear disarmament as a worthy goal. In an editorial reminiscent of those defending “that crazy cowboy” Theodore Roosevelt a few years after he too had entered the office, Stephen J. Rosenfeld conceded that Reagan “did not do crazy things after all” and was “never as monstrous as people said.” Rosenfeld’s column was aptly titled, “Myth of the Nuclear Cowboy.”<sup>500</sup> Today, at the Reagan Ranch Centre Museum in Santa Barbara, the image of Reagan as a warmonger continues to be combated with a display of the Reagans’ highly publicized ranch-invite to former Soviet Premier Gorbachev, who arrived in Santa Barbara on a private jet

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<sup>498</sup> Farber, *The Rise and Fall of American Conservatism*, 204.

<sup>499</sup> *Ibid*, 205-206.

<sup>500</sup> Stephen S. Rosenfeld, “Myth of the Nuclear Cowboy,” *Washington Post* (January 8, 1988): A19.

named the “Capitalist Tool” and then unwittingly wore his ten-gallon cowboy hat backwards during his entire visit.<sup>501</sup>

### **Constraints of the Conservative Frontier Myth**

Ronald Reagan’s initial deployment of the Frontier Myth and pre-1984 shoot-from-the-hip story-telling had not been without awkward moments and major setbacks for his Administration. During his first term, Reagan’s good versus evil “showdown” mentality between an American West and a Soviet East caused some serious difficulties for his associates. Reagan’s strongest ally in the Senate, Paul Laxalt of Nevada, told an interviewer in 2001 that for a time it was his responsibility to meet, on behalf of Reagan, with the Soviet Ambassador. He got to know the Soviet Ambassador, Anatoly Dobrynin, well and seemed to be building a more trustful relationship. “That all went fine until Reagan called the Soviets an Evil Empire,” said Laxalt. “I could have just died, because that just reinforced the Kremlin view that he was just a wild-assed cowboy.”<sup>502</sup>

But it was the Iran-Contra scandal of 1985 to 1987, in which arms were secretly traded to Iran to gain the release of Americans being held hostage in Lebanon, that became the most damaging of Reagan’s mistakes while in office and stemmed directly from the President’s own desire to project himself as a tough and respected leader who exemplified the “manly” values of the Frontier Myth. The deal was viewed by most Americans—including some of Reagan’s most senior cabinet members—as clearly

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<sup>501</sup> Photograph of Gorbachev in backward Stetson appeared on display at the Reagan Ranch Center in Santa Barbara, August 2011, also see Jennifer Warren, “Gorbachev Rides Crest: Ex-Soviet Leader Came, Saw, Conquered California,” *Los Angeles Times* (May 11, 1992), online at <[http://articles.latimes.com/1992-05-11/news/mn-1203\\_1\\_gorbachev-foundation](http://articles.latimes.com/1992-05-11/news/mn-1203_1_gorbachev-foundation)> (accessed August 1, 2013).

<sup>502</sup> Paul Laxalt Interview, Ronald Reagan Oral History Project, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, October 9, 2001, p. 25.



inconsistent with the policy of standing up to terrorism. Iran, after all, was considered one of America's enemies and the public vividly remembered the 1979 takeover of the US Embassy in Teheran. Personal notes from Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger describe conversations with Reagan where the President was determined to trade arms for hostages. Weinberger recorded: "President sd. he could answer charges of illegality but he couldn't answer charges that 'big strong President Reagan passed up a chance to free hostages.'" <sup>503</sup> Weinberger's notes, taken on the day of the conversations, record that he and Secretary of State George Shultz vehemently objected to the President's position and, along with White House Chief of Staff Don Regan, attempted unsuccessfully to sway Reagan away from his course. Later, an independent investigation reached the conclusion that the arms sales to Iran "were carried out with the knowledge of, among others, President Ronald Reagan [and] Vice President George Bush" and also that "large volumes of highly relevant, contemporaneously created documents were systematically and wilfully withheld from investigators by several Reagan Administration officials." <sup>504</sup> Though eleven of fourteen officials charged were convicted of criminal charges, many were later pardoned by President George H. W. Bush. Cowboy Reagan's flawed policy arguably stemmed from his understanding of the demands of the frontier hero fascination with films like the *Rambo* and *Missing in Action* series (featuring their "captivity formula" which Richard Slotkin contends, "links them to the most basic story-form of the Frontier myth" <sup>505</sup>), determination to avoid the kind of recent humiliation

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<sup>503</sup> Digitized versions of these original entries into Caspar Weinberger's Diary, December 7, 1985, can be found at the National Archives and Records Administration website:

<<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB210/14-Weinberger%20Diaries%20Dec%207%20handwritten.pdf>> (accessed March 12, 2012).

<sup>504</sup> Iran-Contra investigation report quoted in Eric Pianin and Thomas B. Edsall. "Schisms From [Reagan] Administration Lingered For Years," A01; Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 648.

<sup>505</sup> Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 648.

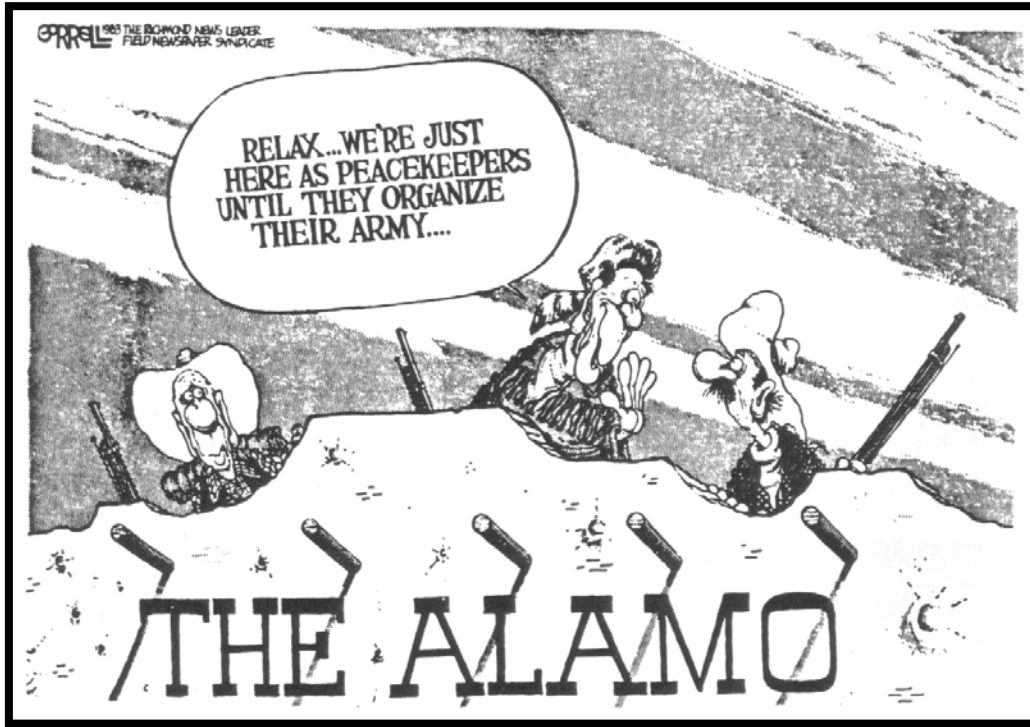
experienced by Jimmy Carter during the Iranian hostage crisis, and his apparent obsession with freeing the Beirut hostages. Together these factors persuaded Reagan and some of his underlings to pursue a series of illegal covert actions that tainted the second term of the Reagan Presidency.

“Irangate” is the event that most challenged the structures of frontier philosophy that Reagan had developed. The structures as Sahlins has explained, simply could not sustain themselves in the face of the events surrounding Irangate. The images of the frontier that Reagan had cultivated required him to project a tough, masculine persona and these in turn contributed to serious policy inconsistencies that backfired on the President, and likewise demonstrated a disregard for the democratic system, and exposed Reagan’s disconnect from the American people. More broadly, Reagan’s adherence to the his conservative incarnation of the Frontier Myth and American exceptionalism not only narrowed his field of judgement but promoted an exclusively American view on international problems.

This same mindset may have also led to Reagan’s earlier failures in Lebanon. According to biographer Lou Cannon, Reagan ignored the advice of his Secretary of Defense and military advisors in 1983 who strongly urged that U.S. forces stationed in Beirut during the Lebanese Civil War be pulled out of that city due to their serious vulnerability (Figure 9.5). On October 23, 1983, hundreds of Marines died when a suicide bomber detonated his vehicle after crashing into their four story barracks.<sup>506</sup>

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<sup>506</sup> Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime*, 356-57.



**Figure 9.5:** A misguided President drops by at his own “Alamo” in Beirut, Lebanon, where 241 American military personnel were killed when truck bombs exploded at their highly vulnerable barracks. (Cartoon by Bob Gorrell, *Richmond News Leader*, 1983, and is reprinted here with permission of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*)

Such tragic turns of events as the Beirut bombing and “credibility gaps” as Iran-Contra may have destroyed most of Reagan’s predecessors. However, the “Teflon” president’s personal popularity helped him to survive these major setbacks in the long run, the future of the conservative frontier myth was not so obviously secured. In sharp contrast to Jimmy Carter and 1984 Democratic presidential candidate Walter Mondale, Reagan continually projected themes of limitless frontiers and optimism and this paid off at the polls.<sup>507</sup>

<sup>507</sup> Polling data discussed in Spragens, *Popular Images of American Presidents*, 605.

Reagan's perception of the frontier past, with its broad nationalist themes, was shaped heavily by his own conservative philosophy and by its application to contemporary political issues. As was the case with his ideological opponent, Lyndon Johnson, this connection came at the expense of integrity with the complexity of history having been replaced with a narrative of overall American destiny. But, as noted earlier, while the disconnect of myth and metaphor with reality eventually destroyed Johnson, Reagan's reputation, though tarnished, weathered these blows. For Reagan, it seemed, "the buck never stopped because the blame never stuck."<sup>508</sup> Middle class Americans, it seems, wanted to believe in Reagan and the revised frontier values which were accepted as a given and which he came, for many, to represent, including: optimism, manliness (as opposed to the softer, more feminine Carter), individualism (freedom from government controls), self-reliance, resilience (as demonstrated after being shot early in his presidency), confidence (in his own economic theories and in Americans ability to conquer all challenges), calmness of purpose, and a spirit of adventure ("Star Wars") that looked to restore the "traditional" past and accept its "lessons" as the nation's polestar for the future.

### **Reagan's Mixed Legacy**

President Reagan painted a portrait of America that was not unlike those created by the artists Frederic Remington and Norman Rockwell, one of the "good old days" much of which never existed except in peoples' happy memories. His *Morning in America* preached small government, insisting that "Government does not solve

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<sup>508</sup> Quotation from Tindall and Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, 1615.

problems...instead, it subsidizes them.”<sup>509</sup> In terms of actual results, however, the size of the federal government grew under Reagan’s presidency due primarily to a massive increase in military spending. Reagan is portrayed as a champion of the tax cutters, but he also raised taxes. His support base was made up of social conservatives but Ron and Nancy rarely attended church.<sup>510</sup> Meanwhile, his cuts to social programs such as Medicare and aid to the poor, cuts to school lunch programs (including an unsuccessful attempt to redefine ketchup and relish as vegetables), anti-union tactics (most notably, the firing of 13,000 federal air traffic controllers), avoidance of civil rights, near complete lack of support for conservation concerns, the Iran-gate controversy, along with tax cuts for the wealthy left many liberal, minority, and underclass Americans bitter.<sup>511</sup>

In 2004, the chair of the NAACP Julian Bond told the *Washington Post*: “For many Americans, this was a time best forgotten....He [Reagan] was a polarizing figure in black America. He was hostile to the generally accepted remedies for discrimination. His appointments were of people as equally hostile. I can’t think of any Reagan policy that African Americans would embrace.”<sup>512</sup> Women’s rights groups, the growing number of urban homeless people, and AIDS victims, also received little support or comfort from the President and his rightist programs. In the frontier version of America that Reagan bought into and perpetuated (both consciously and unconsciously), only conservative-leaning Cowboys seemed welcome. Today it would be difficult to challenge the argument that Reagan’s own heavy emphasis on the individualism strains of the myth over its calls

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<sup>509</sup> Reagan made this statement numerous times throughout his political career. This version is quoted from: Ronald Reagan, *Speaking My Mind: Selected Speeches* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989): 419 – it was taken from a Reagan speech delivered on December 11, 1972).

<sup>510</sup> Pianin and Edsall, “Schisms from the Administration...,” A01.

<sup>511</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>512</sup> *Ibid.*

for community and inclusiveness has contributed to a long-term, increasing inequality in American society and a polarization of American politics.

Yet despite these substantive problems Reagan to a greater degree than any other President, apart from TR, appears to have benefitted in the long-run from his deployment of (a particular conservative brand of) the Frontier Myth. So quickly had the structures of this myth shifted in the wake of LBJ's term in office, and so effectively were they deployed by Reagan, he could use the myth to reshape the national political agenda. Conservatives and many centrists saw his greatest successes in renewing the public's sense of optimism, lowering inflation, improving the standard of living for middle and upper class Americans, and negotiating an arms treaty which helped hasten dramatic political change in Eastern Europe. Even his 1981 tax cuts were for more than just the wealthy as the President insisted on initiating these across the board against the advice of his zealous budget-slasher David Stockman.<sup>513</sup> For a large segment of the American population growing up in the 1970s and 80s, Gerald Ford was perceived as a place-holder, Jimmy Carter as a failure, and Ronald Reagan as a frontier hero—someone bigger than the presidency who, unlike Carter, did not let the office beat him down.<sup>514</sup>

## Conclusion

Ronald Reagan was the first of the radical conservatives—brandishing a revised Frontier Myth that emphasized individualism, liberty, reduction in the size of government, and vast expansion of the military—to reach the presidency. The archetypal fantasy figure, a cowboy with a cause, Reagan left office with an impressive rating of

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<sup>513</sup> Paul Craig Roberts, *The Supply-Side Revolution: An Insider's Account of Policymaking in Washington* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984): 186-187, 191-192.

<sup>514</sup> Cunningham, *Cowboy Conservatism*, xiii, 235.

63% approval/ 29% disapproval.<sup>515</sup> Even many Americans who did not agree with his policies greatly admired him as a person and it is his direct connections with the post-1970s expression of the conservative Frontier Myth that, perhaps more than any other factor, has forged a popular notion today that “cowboy” presidents and politicians are tied to Republicans and conservative ideals. As he prepared to ride off into the sunset in 1988, Reagan told his cowhands at the Republican National Convention: “We lit a prairie fire a few years back....But we can never let the fire go out...There’s still a lot of brush to clear out at the ranch, fences that need repair and horses to ride.”<sup>516</sup> Reagan continued to claim that, as in Western novels and movies, the answers to America’s problems were hard-earned, but simple. Quoting from John Wayne’s character in *The Alamo*, Reagan claimed: “there’s right and wrong. You gotta do one or the other.”<sup>517</sup> At the end of Reagan’s second term, for the first time since poll-taking had begun in the United States, more Americans self-identified as conservatives than as liberals.<sup>518</sup> Benefitting from the events prior to and during much of his time in office Reagan not only fit the requirements of the conservative Frontier Myth, his persona and policies reinforced and popularized it.<sup>519</sup> Concurrently, this shift in frontier and Western symbolism caused more Americans to self-identify with the right than the left—a perception which continues to this day.

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<sup>515</sup> Gerhard Peters. “Final Presidential Job Approval Ratings.” *The American Presidency Project*. Ed. John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California. 1999-2009. Access: <[http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/data/final\\_approval.php](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/data/final_approval.php)> (February 16, 2012).

<sup>516</sup> Reagan, Ronald. “President Ronald Reagan’s Remarks to the 1988 Republican National Convention.” New Orleans, August 15, 1988. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=36273> (accessed 13 March 2012).

<sup>517</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Unforgettable John Wayne,” *Reader’s Digest* (October 1979): 118.

<sup>518</sup> Farber. *The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism*, 163.

<sup>519</sup> See Jeff Roche, ed., *The Political Culture of the New West* (Lawrence KS: University Press of Kansas, 2008): 3.

Through the deployment of conservative expressions of the Frontier Myth, Reagan built a conservative counter-establishment in Washington DC that had been originally established to counterbalance liberals but over time became an establishment in its own right. The political successes of the Reagan Administration were a direct benefactor of the resurgence and transformation of ideological structures of the Frontier Myth. The widely held perceptions of events from 1965 to 1979 worked to break up the consensus of a progressive, liberal frontier myth and ultimately resulted in a new conservative Cowboy consensus built on a combination of nostalgia for the past, a renewed sense of “frontier” optimism and national exceptionalism and, in some respects, resentment. Along with the broader crises and realities of the late 1960s, Lyndon Johnson’s own lack of popularity upon leaving Washington, his association with “not winning” in Vietnam, and a faltering economy, also set the stage for shifting the dominant Western structure and “ownership” of the Frontier Myth from the Democrats to the Republicans. The liberal Frontier Myth no longer matched historic experience (Sahlins) and the structure was transformed: veering hard right. In some respects, the state of Texas provides a kind of microcosm for understanding how historic events and personalities have brought dramatic reversals in the myth’s emphases. The change there from a Democratic stronghold to a Republican one was so marked from LBJ’s presidency through Reagan’s that the latter President could joke to a crowd at a rodeo in Mesquite in 1988 that “it’s hard to believe that once upon a time to be a Republican around here felt a little like being Gary Cooper in “High Noon—outnumbered in a big way.”<sup>520</sup> By the late 1980s, those days were over. Now Reagan was even invoking symbolism which had

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<sup>520</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at a Republican Campaign Rally in Mesquite, Texas,” *Public Papers of the Presidents, The American Presidency Project*, <<http://www.Reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1988/110588c.htm>> (accessed July 13, 2011).



previously been part and parcel of LBJ's repertoire: "I keep a special place in my heart for Texas—for every cowpoke or wildcatter, astronaut or rancher, and every man, woman and child who remembers the Alamo and knows the story of the battle of San Jacinto."<sup>521</sup> Myths will always be with the world and Americans' Frontier Myth structure during the late 1960s through 1980s era was revised to adjust its core features to changing perceptions of reality, some of which were large international events (the Vietnam War) while others were smaller and personal (including Reagan's viewing of the made-for-TV movie *The Day After*) but also influenced, if in a less dramatic and comprehensive way, the nature of the myth. The changing historical events and circumstances of the 1990s and 2000s, in particular during the fourth cowboy presidency of George W. Bush, would usher in additional adjustments to the emphases and influence of the Frontier Myth. As Marshall Sahlins noted in another context, events sometimes cause the structures to change. And once again over the two most recent decades, the power of the myth would work to confirm the supposition advanced by Brian Dippie's that such deeply entrenched visions communicated messages that did not require explanation and have had ongoing consequences for the development of American society and politics.

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<sup>521</sup> *Ibid.*

## X.

### **George W. Bush: The War on Terror and the Frontier Myth**

*Question:* "Do you want [Osama] Bin Laden dead?"

*The President:* "I want justice. There's an old poster out West, as I recall, that said, 'Wanted: Dead or Alive'...."

*Question:* "Are you saying you want him dead or alive, sir? Can I interpret—"

*The President:* "I just remember—all I'm doing is remembering—when I was a kid, I remember that they used to put out there, in the Old West, a wanted poster. It said, 'Wanted: Dead or Alive.' All I want—and America wants him brought to justice. That's what we want."

—President George W. Bush in an exchange with reporters about American mobilization for the "War on Terror" in Arlington, Virginia (September 17, 2001) <sup>522</sup>

### **Hollywood, Frontier Justice and 9/11**

In Stephen McVeigh's recent study, *The American Western* (2007), the author asserts that during the postmodern Clinton years of the 1990s which looked toward "building bridges to the future," the Western "ebbed far away from the center of the American imagination." But in the 2000s the conservative manifestation of the Frontier Myth which had established itself in the Reagan era emerged quickly again in American presidential politics through the context of the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001. As McVeigh contends, Republican President George W. Bush's repeated use of the word "remember" in the above quotation is steeped in

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<sup>522</sup> George W. Bush: "Remarks to Employees in the Pentagon and an Exchange with Reporters in Arlington, Virginia", September 17, 2001. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=65079> (accessed 8 April 2014).

frontier myth and suggests tradition, nostalgia, and the previous triumph of American civilization over savagery.<sup>523</sup> Popular culture during the formative years of George W. Bush's political career and later on in the years of his presidency offer insights into the relationship between the event of 9/11 and the Frontier Myth within his presidential administration. The series of movies featuring *Dirty Harry* (Clint Eastwood) and spanning 1971 to 1988, along with *Open Range* (2003) and *Hidalgo* (2004) are especially relevant.

Though not created in a temporal Western setting, the release of what is arguably the most influential, modern cop film, *Dirty Harry* (1971), was part of a wider conservative retrenchment in American society after the liberal dominance of the 1960s that saw the Western repositioned in the western geography of San Francisco and the west of the American conservative imagination. The central character, Clint Eastwood's Detective Harry Callahan, is a man alone and though a 'maverick' or 'rogue' is also a cop who embodies 'straight' as opposed to 'hip' values. *Dirty Harry*'s run would span until 1988 (Ronald Reagan's final full year in office) but its influence on American identity, especially among conservatives, has been much longer.<sup>524</sup> Harry is a modern-day Western sheriff who becomes the dispenser of tough, frontier justice. He operates in a new moral arena in the present day where the same questions of the Frontier Myth:

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<sup>523</sup> Stephen McVeigh, *The American Western* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007): viii; *Ibid*, vii.

<sup>524</sup> How influential was Eastwood's run on cop films themselves? As *Dirty Harry* might have said: "You've got to ask yourself one question." How many films over the past four decades have been about happy and well-adjusted cops who got along well with their superiors, followed the rules, and caught the evil-doers by operating by the book? Apart from Frances McDormand's character of Marge Gunderson in *Fargo* it would be difficult to think of one.

For the purposes of this study it is worth noting that 2008 Republican Presidential candidates "maverick" John McCain and "rogue" Sarah Palin appeared to possess *Dirty Harry* qualities as well.

*Dirty Harry*, Director: Don Siegel, 1971. The other films in the *Dirty Harry* series include: *Magnum Force*, Director: Ted Post, 1973; *The Enforcer*, Director: James Fargo, 1976; *Sudden Impact*, Director: Clint Eastwood, 1983; and *The Dead Pool*, Director: Buddy Van Horn, 1988. The films also inspired a dozen *Dirty Harry* novels from Warner Books in the early 1980s and a video game in 1990.

right versus wrong, savagery versus civilization, and justice versus injustice play themselves out. But Harry Callahan is *no* Gene Autry, no B-Western cowboy. Nor does his manifestation of the myth contain any remnants of the liberal myth identified in TR's and LBJ's use of the symbolism. Rather, Harry must resort to extra-legal force to defeat his psychotic antagonists, along the way exposing as ineffective any legal means of pursuing criminals and providing movie-goers with a rationale for his one-man, vigilante-style of 'justice'. Detective Callahan uses excessive violence to overcome sadistic opponents; and audiences cheer the hot dog chewing, 44 magnum toting protagonist as he taunts "punks" foolish enough to try and outdraw him to "Go ahead, make my day!"

As literature and film scholar Brian Baker observes about the first film, Harry would deny the insane villain, Scorpio, his rights "or perhaps more properly not consider that Scorpio had recourse to 'rights' because his behavior meant he had not earned them. In essence, the film provides a rationale for police (or, more broadly, American) torture when faced with the unmanageable psychosis of the contemporary criminal."<sup>525</sup> In a similar mode of thinking to those in the Bush Administration of the 2000s, the (un-American) "evil-doers" they would encounter on September 11, 2001 likewise had relinquished their rights to those enjoyed by "civilized" peoples. Baker concludes that "Eastwood's identification with the Western furthers a reactionary undercurrent in *Dirty Harry*: to reconstitute masculinity in a less-troubled form, one which is identical with the Western figure of the lone male frontiersman."<sup>526</sup> Judging from his actions and words as President, George Bush hoped to play a Dirty-Harry like

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<sup>525</sup> Brian Baker, *Masculinity in Fiction and Film: Representing Men in Popular Genres 1945-2000* (Continuum: New York, 2006): 97.

<sup>526</sup> *Ibid*, 100.

gunslinger role with an ends justifies the means approach to dealing with international outlaws who seemingly threatened Americans “civilized” way of life.

*Open Range*, possibly the most critically acclaimed Western so far of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (making *Time Out London’s* “The 50 greatest Westerns” list), appeared in theaters in August 2003 just a few months after the commencement of the Iraq War.<sup>527</sup> The mature Robert Duvall received top billing as Boss Spearman, Kevin Costner (who also produced and directed the film) was the psychologically and emotionally scarred Charley Waite, and Annette Bening played Sue Barlow, the smart, feminist heroine and Charley’s love interest. In most respects, the film is an anti-revisionist return to the postwar era Western with its Cold War belief in domesticity, good versus evil, and the idea of land being used to raise a family—where the villain is a rich, corrupt cattleman and businessman.

In the post 9/11 milieu we witness the Western’s return to the old tale of morally good men who defend the social order from those who would threaten and destroy it; these heroes also defend and maintain traditional family values. At the end of *My Darling Clementine* (1946), Wyatt Earp (Henry Fonda) pledged to return to Clementine (Cathy Downs) after dealing out six-gun justice to the vicious Clanton gang. *Open Range* ends exactly the same way, with Charley staying true to his value system and settling down with Sue once he has fulfilled his manly duty of taking down the black hats. *Open Range* is a return to the depiction of violence as a means to a happy ending, a return to the traditional values of the classic Hollywood western. It shows a world where “Old America,” scarred by violence, can imagine a new future where domestic tea cups become more important than bought gunmen or corruption.

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<sup>527</sup> *Open Range* (2000), TIG Productions, Dir: Kevin Costner.

The characters in this early Bush-era Western are remarkably familiar. Charley does not talk much because he is a real man who prefers action to words. Duvall receives iconic treatment with plenty of shots of him on his horse as stunning scenic images of the Rockies at dawn outline his silhouette. “Boss” is the last of the cowboy type—heroic, loyal, respectful and tolerant. Facing a tyrannical landowner named Denton Baxter and a corrupt and impotent sheriff, Boss, Charley and their small band of “free-grazers” have become victims of the cattle baron’s unprovoked and vicious attack. Boss forcefully makes the cowboys’ case in a crowded and potentially unfriendly saloon: a speech that later pays off when townsfolk slowly but surely come to the free-grazers aid (as opposed to the cowardly townsfolk in 1952’s *High Noon*). As President, George Bush likewise hoped to win international support for his “War on Terror” in response to 9/11 for an invasion of Iraq: though ultimately the response he received for the first proved much more successful than the latter. In the climactic gun battle of *Open Range* we see a clear distinction made between justice and revenge as Boss steps in and stops Charley from killing one of the wounded men. Like Bush’s justification for pursuing Al Qaeda, you kill those who would do the same to you, not those who pose no threat—collateral damage aside. Most significant of all, as historian Walter Metz writes, *Open Range* represents “the resurgence of a resolutely anti-revisionist western, one which truly believes that Hollywood had it right all along, seems to be the special provenance of 2003 when [the film] promised to hop across the preceding thirty revisionist years of the western and return us to representations of the simpler America of the postwar years.”<sup>528</sup> *Open Range* moved the structure of American westerns of the first Bush term even further

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<sup>528</sup> Walter Metz, “‘Mother Needs You’: Kevin Costner’s *Open Range* and the Melodramatics of the American Western.” Chapter 4 in Murray Pomerance, ed., *A Family Affair: Cinema Calls Home* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2008): 72-73.

away from the revisionism of what Elliot West described as a “longer, grimmer but more interesting story”<sup>529</sup> of the West. Of greater significance for the purposes of this study, though, instead of riding into the sunset alone (the conservative myth), Charley settles down with the woman to start a domestic, settled, civilized life (the liberal myth) just as Chico did with Petra in *The Magnificent Seven*, four decades before.

In 2004 Disney released *Hidalgo*: one year after *Open Range* and the American invasion of Iraq—at a time when the “War on Terror” had seemingly reached its most intense period. This supposedly fact based Western was set in the Middle East and replaced hostile Indians with stereotyped, generic Arabs as the potential threat to the frontier hero. The main character, Frank T. Hopkins (Viggo Mortensen), enters a race with these celluloid Arabs in a kind of allegory of Americans attempts to make sense of their nation’s new mission in the world. The savagery versus civilization theme is paramount throughout and even the title of the film, named for the hero’s horse, provides viewers with a constant reminder of one of the key icons of the American West. Other strong associations with Americans in their post 9/11 circumstances included the main female character, Jazira’s (Zuleikha Robinson) name resonating with Al Jazeera (the TV network); her name given her father “Sheikh Riyadh” (played by Egyptian born Omar Sharif) with its direct association to the capital of Saudi Arabia (a key ally for the US in the Arab world); and the hero Hopkins earning of respect from the Sheikh when he brandishes his Colt pistol – “a symbol of both the hero’s strength on the American

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<sup>529</sup> Elliot West, “A Longer, Grimmer, but More Interesting Story,” in Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin, eds., *Trails: Toward a New Western History* (Lawrence KS: University of Kansas Press, 1991): 103-111.

frontier and the U.S. global power past and present.”<sup>530</sup> An important message of the film is that Arabs, like rebellious and backward Indians of the Old West or the Viet Cong of Southeast Asia, have “no future” in the world unless they possess the good sense to “work hand in hand with the West, America.”<sup>531</sup>

Related to this message, the love story between Hopkins and Jazira includes their grappling with a Muslim practice that US President Bush alluded to several times in his post 9/11 speeches: the “women of cover.” Bush was referring to the Muslim women who wear head scarves or cover their face. As he explained at one town hall meeting in California in early 2002:

I love the story that came out about the women of cover, of Muslim faith, who didn't feel comfortable about going [out of] their home. And so Jewish and Christian groups...said, “We'll walk you to the store,” because the America we know is not one that castigates an individual based on their religion. The American we know is a society that's open and free and a society that says, if you dream the big dream, you can realize it if you work hard....That's the spirit of America that I know.<sup>532</sup>

In *Hidalgo*, the female Muslim woman gains empowerment and independence from patriarchy and Islam through her own uncovering. Jazira is fulfilling the role of the prisoner/victim in the frontier captivity narrative, with an Arab woman replacing a white American female, as Hopkins does all he can to free her from her restrictive community, family and clothing. In the end Jazira uncovers in front of the western hero in defiance of her powerful father and in rejection of her perceived role as an oppressed

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<sup>530</sup> Quotation from film critic quoted in Susan Kollin, “‘Remember, you're the good guy,’ *Hidalgo*, American Identity, and Histories of the Western,” *American Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 1/2 (Spring/Summer 2010): 20.

<sup>531</sup> Quotations from film critic Emad El-Din Aysha appear in *Ibid*.

<sup>532</sup> George W. Bush, “Remarks at a Townhall Meeting in Ontario, California,” January 5, 2002. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=62589> (accessed 2 January 2015).



“woman of cover.” Through uncovering the audience is presented with a woman who has moved toward liberation and freedom or what the president of the United States himself might have called, the “American spirit.” Several staples of the conservative Frontier Myth, including the superiority of Americanism over inferior and less-“civilized” cultures, exclusion of un-American ways of doing, and the dream that anyone can make it “big” if they work hard and embrace American-style freedom and liberty—were all present in the Disney creation.

The dominant plotline of *Hidalgo* too is remarkably familiar as a down and out American cowboy whose glory days are supposedly long past takes his mustang to the Middle East, faces down Arab treachery, and, in the end, is victorious in the 3,000 mile “Ocean of Fire” horse race across the Arabian Desert. Hopkins’ character thus wins the girl’s heart, and reaffirms American virtues and greatness across the globe. In besting the backward Arabs the American hero also demonstrates his supremacy over what turns out to be an anachronistic “Old World” British presence so that the USA can take its rightful place as the last, best hope of liberty in the troubled region.

In the high security-culture following September 11, then, conservative Westerns could serve the same kind of purpose of those that predominated the post-World War II period—also a time when the United States worked toward securing its place as a world superpower and making commitments abroad that caused considerable anxieties domestically. Stanley Corkin contended in *Cowboys as Cold Warriors* that Westerns served to help “mediate national problems ‘by grafting the historical onto the mythic’ in an effort to help viewers ‘adjust to new concepts of national definition.’”<sup>533</sup> New, old-

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<sup>533</sup> Stanley Corkin, *Cowboys as Cold Warriors* quoted in Kollin, “Remember, you’re the good guy,” 21.

style Western films such as *Open Range* and *Hidalgo* arguably performed the same kind of function in the anxious and paranoid first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Western was not dead, after all, as so many had claimed: rather, it had reinvented itself by taking on a structure that bore some striking similarities to that which dominated the genre more than three decades earlier. The event of 9/11 is outside of the realm of other narrative structures; as a result, President Bush II and many Americans turned to the Frontier Myth as a way of explaining what had happened and of providing an answer to the question of what to do next. A happy ending was still within reach, so long as Americans like Charley Waite and Frank Hopkins remained true to their value system. This, so the message went, was once again the mission of Americans throughout the globe in its efforts to deal with its latest enemy: Al Qaeda and its alleged enablers.

### **How Bush Compares with His Frontier President Predecessors**

A full century after the quintessential frontier president Theodore Roosevelt sat in the presidential saddle, conservative “Bush 43” likewise attempted to deploy Western symbolism in the aftermath of 9/11 and, in particular, his prosecution of the Iraq War. The conservative structure of the myth had changed little in the intervening years between Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. There was never a resurgence of liberal cowboyism under Clinton, instead the myth lay largely dormant during the 1990s and was reactivated by the event of 9-11. George W. Bush’s cowboy-speak sat well with many Americans at the early stages of the “War on Terror” as the buckskinned-President attempted to use “Western” rhetoric and lessons from popular culture to reaffirm the United States’ sense of identity and purpose on the international stage. With America as the heroic cowboy and literally Edward Said’s Oriental “other” as the enemy, Bush

attempted to project many of the same values of Western convention: a view of the world as an arena for the battle of light versus darkness where “evil-doers” needed to be tracked down and punished along with its depictions of the heroic and special virtues of the United States. President Bush’s plain spoken, frontier “dead or alive,” “smoke ‘em out” talk was a direct style that, at least initially, was well received by many Americans, if not by most living outside of the United States. But while “going Western” would work as a boon for Bush’s assertive policies in the early stages and even helped his re-election in 2004, by his second term this reliance on the Frontier Myth fell as flat as it had for the liberal LBJ. In other words, the myth could only sustain policy so far before it collapsed under its own weight when events proved it incapable of doing what its proponents advocated. The myth’s eventual inapplicability to Johnson and Bush (though retaining some of the same language) was in part a product of American presidential discourse and policy but more generally it was a victim of changing historical events and circumstances.

As Marshall Sahlins articulated in *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities*, sometimes a combination of crises or series of events can prove so disruptive that they can no longer be fully explained by invoking or relying on the wisdom embodied in the myth. This development would ultimately bring about the demise in stature and influence of both LBJ and Bush 43. Brian Dippie’s numerous “Vanishing American” examples demonstrated the power of myth to influence policy. When the War in Iraq, the economy, and events (such as Hurricane Katrina) went south for the Bush Administration in its second term the symbolism of the conservative Frontier Myth lost its power and influence over much of the American public and policy makers. The transformative events of the first decade and a half of the twenty first century have

continued to impact on American society and to extend the value of the Frontier Myth as a way of explaining and understanding America.

Of the four presidents most closely associated with the Frontier Myth, George W. Bush was arguably the most contrived and self-conscious of the group. Bush and his team were anxious to move away from the apparently unsuccessful “Ivy League and Pork Rinds” mix of his one-term president father, George H. W. Bush (Bush 41).<sup>534</sup> In particular, the younger Bush wanted to show no signs of being “in part a member of that Eastern Establishment that caused Barry Goldwater to propose sawing off the Atlantic seaboard and setting it adrift.”<sup>535</sup> Bush Jr. had learned this lesson the hard way. In his late 1970s bid for a seat in Congress, he was portrayed by his Democratic opponent as a “Daddy’s boy, *not from around heah...*”<sup>536</sup> Having spent too many years away from the frontier, Bush lost the contest. According to his biographer, Bill Minutaglio, Bush Jr. believes he was later successful in his gubernatorial race against Democrat Ann Richards because of his team’s strategy to make “Dubya” even “more Texan” than his opponent.<sup>537</sup> Arguably then, George W. Bush’s cowboy persona was perceived as vital for his own political survival as he needed a different kind of identity than that of the rest of his family.

In October 2008, at an event celebrating what would have been TR’s 150<sup>th</sup> Birthday, George Bush compared himself to that first modern Frontier President, telling Americans that Roosevelt “was a man who felt at home on a sprawling ranch in the

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<sup>534</sup> R.W. Apple, Jr. “Bush Offering a Special Mix: Ivy League and Pork Rinds,” *New York Times*, January 19, 1989, A1.

<sup>535</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>536</sup> Quotation appears in Karen S Hoffman, “Visual Persuasion in George W. Bush’s Presidency: Cowboy Imagery in Public Discourse,” *Congress & the Presidency*, Vol. 38 (2011): 336. Also see: Karen Olsson, “A Shrub Grows in Midland,” *Texas Observer*, June 25, 1999, <http://www.texasobserver.org/1175-a-shrub-grows-in-midland/> (accessed 27 February 2014).

<sup>537</sup> Minutaglio, Bill. *First Son: George W. Bush and the Bush Family Dynasty*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 1999): 8.

West. He believed in the importance of a strenuous life of exercise. I can relate to that.”<sup>538</sup> Bush then described the Rough Rider portrait of Roosevelt on horseback that hung above the fireplace in what was TR’s former office, claiming that it had been a reminder to him as the occupant of the White House. “When I look at it I think about the character and courage that is necessary for any President.” Having excised TR’s liberal elements, Bush then proudly declared: “For the past 8 years, his legacy has been an inspiration to me....”<sup>539</sup>

In many respects, though, TR and Bush appear to have had little in common. While Roosevelt was a Renaissance man, intellectual curiosity was viewed suspiciously in George W. Bush’s White House. The Rough Rider was distrustful of Big Business while Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney thrived in the halls of corporate power. Biographer Edmund Morris compared the disastrous Enron Corporation, a company that had been closer to the Bush Administration than any other, as “a very good parallel” to the corporate trusts that Roosevelt had very publicly assailed as “malefactors of great wealth.”<sup>540</sup> Bush’s own “ranching” comparisons, meanwhile, seemed shaky at best given the twenty first century president’s apparent fear of horses.<sup>541</sup> These substantive differences leave the impression that President Bush’s admiration for the first Frontier President was either misplaced or was contrived and did not run much deeper than the surface.

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<sup>538</sup> George W. Bush: “Remarks Honoring President Theodore Roosevelt’s 150<sup>th</sup> Birthday,” October 27, 2008. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=84767> (accessed 26 June 2012).

<sup>539</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>540</sup> Edmund Morris quoted in Burt Solomon, 2002. “The Cult of TR. (Cover story).” *National Journal* 34, No. 7: 452. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 19, 2014).

<sup>541</sup> Alex Spillius, “George Bush the Texan is ‘Scared of Horses’,” *The Telegraph*, 21 September 2007. Online at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1563773/George-Bush-the-Texan-is-scared-of-horses.html> (accessed 24 October 2014).

But if Roosevelt's liberal cowboy record could never be absorbed deeply into the conservative frontier mythology of the early twenty-first century, the Bush team had a more suitable frontier predecessor in mind: Ronald Reagan. Based on the actions of Bush and his team it would appear that they attempted to deploy the Cowboy Reagan model, in terms of both style and substance, every time it had an opportunity. Just prior to his run for the presidency Bush purchased a sprawling ranch in the Texas Midlands near the town of Crawford. The ranch conjured up images of Reagan on horseback at Rancho del Cielo. Reagan used to disappear to his ranch and called it a vacation. But the more self-conscious Bush made it a blatant showcase of his authenticity. Ironically, like Reagan, Bush went to great lengths to run his ranch on ecologically sound principles while at the same time eliminating environmental regulation across the country.<sup>542</sup> For Bush this pure Old West scene replaced the connections to his ancestral estate at Kennebunkport, Maine, which had been the home of the Bush family since the turn of the nineteenth century. The ranch would serve as the backdrop for the rest of the mythology tapped into by Bush and Cheney and as a counter to the bureaucratic, Washington establishment. Bush, as with the Californian Reagan, would play the role of the "outsider." And, as LBJ had fully understood, doing business at the ranch gave a President the opportunity to play up the Frontier narrative in place of the office's associations with the urban capital. *Cowboys and Indians* magazine recognized the

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<sup>542</sup> As David Farber has assessed, during the Bush presidency big oil and other major extractive industries "were in the catbird seat" while those seeking government regulation "had no place at the table," Even Theodore Roosevelt's old stomping ground in North Dakota was soon in trouble from oil drilling. David Farber, *The Rise and Fall of American Conservatism*, 239; for the impact of Bush's policies on TR's Ranch see Bill Donahue, "Beauty and the Badlands: In a State Where George Bush Sees Oil, Teddy Roosevelt Found Immortality and Mystery," *Sierra*, Vol. 87, No. 2, (March/April 2002): 34-43.

dichotomy right away: “The town of Crawford is about as far from Washington D.C. as a man could hope to get.”<sup>543</sup>

In terms of his own persona, George W. Bush may have gone to an elite prep school and then Yale, but despite the blue blood schooling and family name he had the common touch and showed no evidence of snobbery. Many Americans liked that.<sup>544</sup> Sounding much like Reagan, he insisted that he believed strongly in a few core conservative beliefs including less government, lower taxes and a greater reliance on the private sector and individual frontier-like initiative. And Bush had the advantage of not being the kind of scary, extremist, Goldwater-type of conservative who pushed away too many middle-of-the-road voters. When he ran for President in 2000 he did not want people to be afraid of him or of his presidency and tried to soften some of the harsh and exclusionary language used by some in the neo-conservative movement. For example, George Bush spoke of compassion for the poor and disadvantaged but paradoxically claimed he could do this by reducing government: he never clearly articulated how this would work. As a presidential candidate, he was not willing to change his policies to win minority votes but was also not a racist and wanted to get passed the kind of race-baiting and code words that his party had been employing since the early 1960s.

On foreign policy, Bush insisted at the presidential debates that Americans should avoid nation building, avoid overcommitting the US military around the world, and not tell other nations the way they should run their own affairs. He ran hard on the character and morality issue and insisted that the country needed a change from the “X-

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<sup>543</sup> *Cowboys and Indians* quoted from in Mark West and Chris Carey. “Re (Enacting) Frontier Justice: The Bush Administration’s Tactical Narration of the Old West Fantasy after September 11.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 92, No. 4 (November 2006): 393.

<sup>544</sup> For an excellent examination of Bush’s pre-presidential persona see Farber, *The Rise and Fall of American Conservatism*, 217-219, 231-236.

rated” days of President Bill Clinton. In this vein, Bush tried to portray himself as a straight-shooter, a man of the regular people, one who used direct language and called things the way he saw them. Early on in the Bush presidency, *Los Angeles Times* editorialist Ronald Brownstein apparently bought into the image in his own comparison of Bush with Bill Clinton: “The White House seems to be telling voters that Bush may be a man of fewer words than his predecessor, but at least you can trust his words. In White House iconography, Bush is Gary Cooper to Clinton’s Elmer Gantry.”<sup>545</sup>

Bush could not attack Clinton (and by association, his Vice President Al Gore) as a “tax and spend” liberal since during his tenure the Democratic President had not only balanced the budget but had actually achieved government surpluses through very careful federal spending programs. But even this outstanding accomplishment was, remarkably, attacked as a major failure when Bush told Americans that: “The surplus is not the government’s money; the surplus is the people’s money.” In Reaganesque style Bush pledged that if he were elected he would give the surplus back by cutting taxes.<sup>546</sup> For many Americans living in Red States, small-town and rural America, Bush’s frontier atmospherics, laid back manner, and promise of tax cuts seemed to help galvanize his Republican half of the electorate against his 2000 Democratic Party opponent, Al Gore. One sign hoisted during the 2000 Campaign seemed to sum up the red state Republican sentiments: “This Country Needs Cowboys, Not Smarty Pants.”<sup>547</sup> The conservative Frontier Myth like the liberal one of LBJ’s day, informed Americans that the rural state

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<sup>545</sup> “George W. Bush Against Telling Other Nations What To Do – 2000 Presidential Debate,” YouTube, October 11, 2000. < [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y\\_b2wRPgcyw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_b2wRPgcyw) > (accessed April 22, 2014); Ronald Brownstein, “Bush’s Rustic Vacation Continues Clinton Contrast,” *Los Angeles Times* (August 13, 2001): A8 quoted in Dmitri, Holiday. *Frontier Justice: Cowboy Ethics and the Bush Doctrine of Preemption*. MA Thesis, University of Chicago (August 2003): 33-34.

<sup>546</sup> George W. Bush quoted in Farber, *The Rise and Fall of American Conservatism*, 235.

<sup>547</sup> Eileen Boris, “On Cowboys and Welfare Queens: Independence, Dependence, and Interdependence at Home and Abroad,” *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 41 (2007): 618.



regions best represented the “real” America—though the simpler vision of what that meant now represented the values of individualism and freedom over that of community and mutual help. This self-flattery played especially well in the fly-over states and smaller, cities, towns and rural areas of the Southern states (which George Bush swept in 2004 and 2008) and, apart from the Pacific states, in the West.



**Figures 10.1 and 10.2:** In this 2004 campaign bumper sticker (left) the Bush team attempts to transfer the iconic affection of American voters for the white Stetsoned Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush. Democratic non-believers countered with a campaign button of their own (right) featuring “fake” cowboys of the GOP. (From the author’s collection).

Republican Party faithful had been longing for a new Reagan since Reagan. As Bill Keller of the *New York Times* put it in 2003, for George W. Bush “the analogy has the added virtue of providing an alternative political lineage; he’s not Daddy’s Boy, he’s Reagan Jr.” Writing two months prior to the commencement of the Iraq War he added: “Some Republicans speak of the current era, with the culmination of Reagan’s ballistic missile defense and the continuing assault on marginal tax rates and, especially, the standing tall against global evil as the recommencing of the Reagan ‘revolution’.”<sup>548</sup>

<sup>548</sup> Bill Keller, “The Radical Presidency of George W. Bush: Reagan’s Son,” *The New York Times Magazine* (January 26, 2003), reprinted online at ABC News website, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/story?id=120601> (accessed 24 February 2014).

Britain's *The Economist* agreed when it offered this response to its own question, "To what extent is George Bush Mr. Reagan's heir?" in 2004:

The similarities between the two men's administrations are striking. Like Mr. Reagan, Mr. Bush prefers simplicity to nuance; like Mr. Reagan, he has made tax cuts and a huge defence build-up the signature tunes of his administration; like Mr. Reagan, he sees himself as engaged in a struggle with evil (this time an "axis" not an "empire"); and like Mr. Reagan, he is widely regarded outside the United States as a dangerous cowboy.

*The Economist* piece noted that the parallels were "deliberate" as Bush attempted to model himself on Reagan rather than his own father.<sup>549</sup> Along with the "dangerous" cowboy comparisons, the propensity for large deficits (that dwarfed Reagan's), and a perceived lack of smarts also loomed big in liberal journalists and scholars' comparisons of the frontier politicians. Most Republicans and some moderates, however, were elated by the comparisons.<sup>550</sup> In a July 7, 2003 article entitled "Bring it on, Mr. President," appearing on gopusa.com, Doug Patton declared: "We know exactly where he [President Bush] stands, and so do our enemies, just as they did with Reagan."<sup>551</sup>

Mark West and Chris Carey argue, convincingly, that after 9/11 in particular Bush and Cheney's decision to go full bore in resurrecting Frontier Reagan was part of a focused and deliberate effort to protect the Republican base and to challenge the majority of those remaining "Reagan Democrats" to stay on side with them during wartime. Both major world events (Sahlins) and political realities (West and Carey) drove these comparisons. With the divide between the political parties widening, the

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<sup>549</sup> "Special Report on the Reagan Legacy: He Led a Revolution. Will It Survive?" *The Economist*, June 12, 2004: 26.

<sup>550</sup> See quotations from Robert Novak in Keller and Bush vs. Reagan deficits described in Farber, *The Rise and Fall of American Conservatism*, 238.

<sup>551</sup> Doug Patton, "Bring It On, Mr. President!" *Gopusa*, July 7, 2003, [http://www.gopusa.com/commentary/dpatton/2003/dp\\_0707p.shtml](http://www.gopusa.com/commentary/dpatton/2003/dp_0707p.shtml) (accessed 26 August 2009).

targeted audience increasingly became their supporters in the winning Red States.<sup>552</sup> In 2000 virtually every county with a cow in it went for Bush while large cities were just as enthusiastic for Gore. As *The Economist* observed in 2004: “At home, Mr. Reagan had no choice but to reach out to Democrats, because in 1980, registered Democrats outnumbered registered Republicans by 17 percentage points. In today’s 50-50 America, Mr. Bush’s main priority is to galvanise his half of the electorate.”<sup>553</sup> There can be no doubt that Bush’s deployment of the frontier imagery and symbolism, at least initially, helped secure his half for 2004.

### **The Events: 9/11 and Iraq**

The policy issue most informed by the Frontier Myth was the response to the attacks of September 11, 2001. On that Tuesday morning the architectural symbols of American power, business in New York, the military headquarters of the Pentagon, and Federal Government institutions were either destroyed, damaged, or under intense threat. Prior to the events of that day, Bush had numerous ambitions for domestic policy and only a few major ones related to foreign policy. But after the attacks all other “competing priorities were reframed through a policy lens of a singular focus: ridding the world, but most specifically the United States, of the scourge of catastrophic terrorism.”<sup>554</sup> Here the shattering events of one day would bring about a change in the emphasis and, in some respects, structure of the Frontier Myth so that it would now attempt to accommodate policies of pre-emption and unilateralism in world affairs on

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<sup>552</sup> The Republicans’ target audience discussed in West and Carey, “(Re) Enacting Frontier Justice,” 402.

<sup>553</sup> “Special Report on the Reagan Legacy,” 26.

<sup>554</sup> Stanley A. Renshon, “Presidential Address: George W. Bush’s Cowboy Politics: An Inquiry” *Political Psychology*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (2005): 590.

an unprecedented scale. From September 11<sup>th</sup> onward Bush had found his mission, his message and, as political scientist Stanley A. Renshon has contended, “his life’s purpose.”<sup>555</sup>

George W. Bush quickly placed his American crusade against terrorism within the context of the Frontier Myth by emphasizing some of its specific features. Almost immediately, the President’s language in speeches and news conferences began making references to the Old West: in particular those popular images emphasizing savage enemies, justice, cowboys, hunters and the wild frontier. Readyng his troops like frontiersmen or a vigilante posse, Bush told Americans that he was sending their sons and daughters out into a wilderness that “knows no borders.”<sup>556</sup> The world was depicted once again as a new frontier and the President and his nation as the gunslingers who would bring to justice those forces of evil threatening freedom and civilization: “This is a fight to say to the freedom-loving people of the world: we will not allow ourselves to be terrorized by somebody who thinks they can hit and hide in a cave somewhere.”<sup>557</sup> The “Wanted” poster that Bush had first alluded to in 2001 strongly resonated with the American public and the media. The *New York Post* was one of three Big Apple newspapers to publish posters featuring Osama Bin Laden: its double page “Wanted Dead or Alive” pull out was pasted up all over the city in store and residence windows and vehicles, sometimes with the “Alive” heavily scratched out.<sup>558</sup> Similarly, when Bush

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<sup>555</sup> *Ibid*, 591.

<sup>556</sup> George W. Bush: “Remarks to the Community at Travis Air Force Base, California,” October 17, 2001. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=64258> (accessed 27 October 2014).

<sup>557</sup> George W. Bush: “Remarks to Employees in the Pentagon and an Exchange with Reporters in Arlington, Virginia,” September 17, 2001. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=65079> (accessed 27 October 2014).

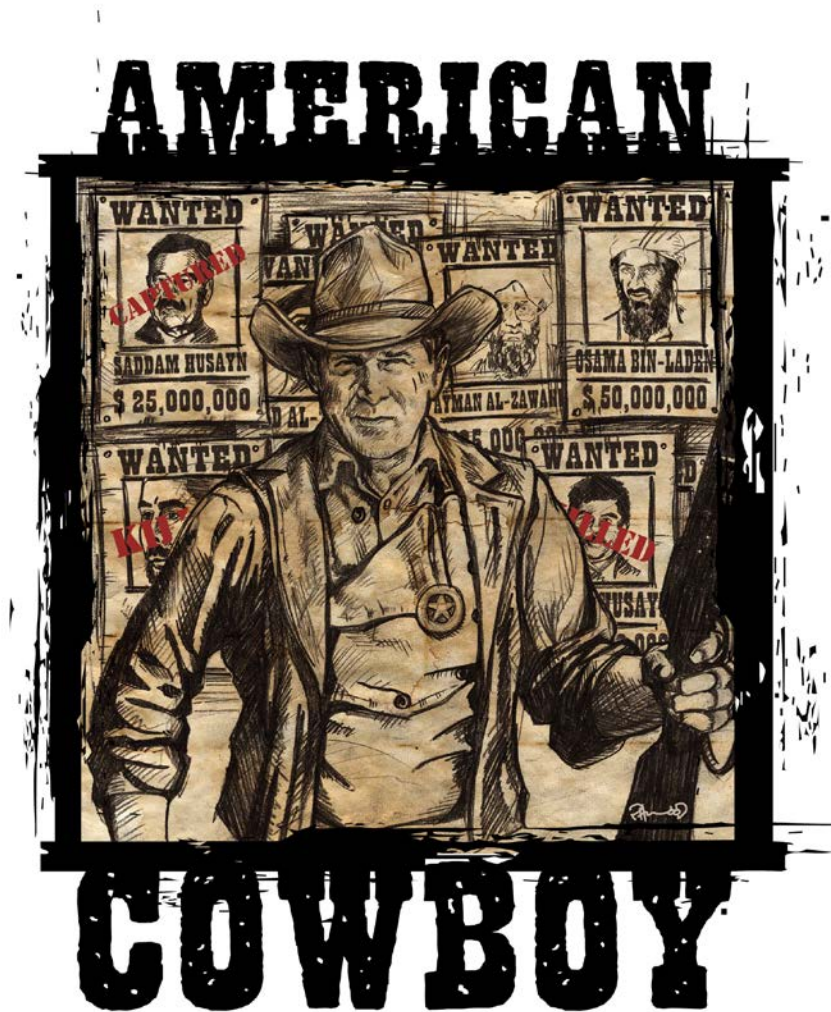
<sup>558</sup> *New York Post* poster described in Ryan Malphurs, “The Media’s Frontier Construction of George W. Bush.” *Journal of American Culture*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (June 2008): 195.

addressed the nation on the impending invasion of Iraq on March 17, 2003, he issued an ultimatum: "Saddam Hussein and his sons must leave Iraq within 48 hours. Their refusal to do so will result in military conflict, commenced at a time of our choosing."<sup>559</sup> A plethora of media articles and editorials around the world made connections between this announcement and George W. Bush acting like a sheriff who told the outlaws to get out of town or else. As one journal reported: "it sounded like Wyatt Earp telling the bad guy he had 48 hours to get out of Dodge."<sup>560</sup> Bush, remembering that "old poster out West" from his days watching cowboy movies and TV as a kid, was now acting upon these ideas in the same manner that his old celluloid heroes would have dispensed with a snake-eyed villain.

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<sup>559</sup> George W. Bush: "Address to the Nation on Iraq," March 17, 2003. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=63713>. (accessed 25 April, 2014).

<sup>560</sup> *OTC Journal* quoted in Karen Dodwell, "From the Center: The Cowboy Myth, George W. Bush, and the War with Iraq," *Americana* (March 2004): [http://www.americanpopularculture.com/archive/politics/cowboy\\_myth.htm](http://www.americanpopularculture.com/archive/politics/cowboy_myth.htm) (accessed 12 June 2012).



**Figure 10.3: “American Cowboy”: artist’s depiction of Marshal Bush bringing frontier justice to a plethora of WANTED “evil-doers.”** (“All American Cowboy,” 2005. © Artist: Philip H. Ward, Tucson, AZ. Reproduced under the Fair Dealing [educational purposes] provision of the Canadian Copyright Act)

LBJ’s Vietnam, explored in Chapter 6, has been widely understood in terms of the Myth of the Frontier. Similarly, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were cast as the most recent in a long line of battles “between savagery and civilization.” Symbolically, Iraq in particular became the newest frontier, the latest “Indian Country.” When Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld visited Fort [Kit] Carson in October 2003, he told the

members of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Cavalry Guard which served in Iraq that: “In the global war on terror, U.S. forces, including thousands from this base, have lived up to the legend of Kit Carson, fighting terrorists in the mountains of Afghanistan, hunting the remnants of the deadly regime in Iraq, working with local populations to help secure victory....Few men have been chosen by destiny to serve their country as Kit Carson served, and fewer still have risen to the challenge.” Rumsfeld’s speech and performance of the historic 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Color Guard in their nineteenth century garb—steeped in nostalgia for a mythic past—was carefully choreographed to provide legitimacy to the invasion of Iraq with numerous references to settling the West. The implication was clear: just as the 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry had defeated a savage foe in the Indian Wars, the contemporary 3<sup>rd</sup> had led the charge into Iraq to root out current day “insurgents.” <sup>561</sup>

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<sup>561</sup> Barry Stephenson, “Swaggering Savagery and the New Frontier,” *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, Vol. 16 (Summer 2007): 5; Donald Rumsfeld quoted in *Ibid*, 8.





**Figure 10.4: Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld thanks troops for “following in the footsteps of Christopher ‘Kit’ Carson.” October 7, 2003** (Unknown Photographer. US Department of Defense)<sup>562</sup>

In his September 17, 2001 remarks to employees at the Pentagon, President Bush had characterized his coalition as the gathering of a posse preparing to ride out and capture the enemy. “We are putting together a coalition that is a coalition dedicated to declaring to the world we will do what it takes to find the terrorists, to rout them out and

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<sup>562</sup> Quotation and image appear in Donna Miles, “Rumsfeld Thanks Troops, Likens Them to American Western Legend,” U.S. Department of Defense website, *DoD News*, 7 October 2003, <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=28364> (accessed 27 October 2014). Photo URL: [http://www.defense.gov/DODCMSShare/NewsStoryPhoto/2003-10/200310075a\\_hr.jpg](http://www.defense.gov/DODCMSShare/NewsStoryPhoto/2003-10/200310075a_hr.jpg) (accessed 27 October 2014).



to hold them accountable.”<sup>563</sup> Sounding again much like LBJ’s depictions of the Viet Cong, the enemy were depicted by the President as both savage and cowardly. Al Qaeda and their operatives are “an enemy that likes to hide and burrow in...There’s no rules. It’s barbaric behavior. They slit throats of women on airplanes in order to achieve an objective that is beyond comprehension and they like to hit and, then they like to hide out.”<sup>564</sup> No longer are these the heroic guerilla fighters, the Mujahideen who fought the Soviets in the 1980s and were praised as “freedom fighters” by the Reagan Administration. Instead, like mythic Native Americans once portrayed as attacking towns and killing innocent settlers to satisfy their bloodthirsty cravings, the Islamic terrorists and their Taliban hosts in Afghanistan seem more animal-like than human. John Cawelti reminds us that an important formula of the classic Western was that the villains were so evil and repulsive “the hero is both intellectually and emotionally justified in destroying them.”<sup>565</sup> Violence via Judge Colt was necessary in order to protect those higher values of law, peace, and domestic harmony.<sup>566</sup>

The shattering events of 9/11 would result in President’s Bush’s emphasis on one feature of the myth’s structure in particular: employing frontier ethics, the world was repeatedly divided up by his Administration in terms of good versus evil. In Peter Singer’s *The President of Good and Evil* (2004) the author claims that George W. had employed the word “evil,” almost always as a noun, approximately 1,000 times and in

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<sup>563</sup> George W. Bush: "Remarks to Employees in the Pentagon and an Exchange with Reporters in Arlington, Virginia," September 17, 2001. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=65079>. (accessed 8 April 2014).

<sup>564</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>565</sup> John G. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique* (revised 1984 edition) quoted in Dmitri, “Frontier Justice,” 18.

<sup>566</sup> Cawelti paraphrased from Dmitri, “Frontier Justice,” 18.

319 speeches during the first year and a half of his presidency.<sup>567</sup> Rejecting moral relativism, Bush declared at the National Cattlemen's Beef Association Meeting: "I view this current conflict as either us versus them [or] evil versus good. And there is no in between." The War on Terror was, in Bush's own words, a showdown or "monumental struggle of good versus evil, but good will prevail." Bush believed in "self-reliant" unilateralism and that nations perceived as evil must be strongly opposed by a tough and uncompromising America.<sup>568</sup> Further, the president made it clear on numerous occasions that the people of the world were either "with us or against us." For Bush, there was no room for middle ground.<sup>569</sup> As in classic Western stories beginning with *The Virginian*, the President neither accommodated nor would he negotiate with the bad guys. And like John Wayne, or for that matter the celluloid Frank Hopkins, he wished to portray himself as a person of steadfast moral superiority who was acting on a "higher calling."<sup>570</sup> American power under the guiding principles of the Bush Doctrine was said to be a force in the world for goodness and light: "There is no doubt in my mind we're doing the right thing. Not one doubt," Bush declared in one interview.<sup>571</sup> And the President went further than any of his war time predecessors, when he claimed not only that America and the forces of good would defeat its enemies but that Bush and his

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<sup>567</sup> Peter Singer, *The President of Good and Evil: The Ethics of George W. Bush* (New York: Dutton, 2004): 2, quoted in Farber, 242.

<sup>568</sup> George W. Bush: "Remarks Following a Meeting With the National Security Team," September 12, 2001. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=58058> (accessed April 28, 2014).

<sup>569</sup> For two "with us or against us" examples see: George W. Bush, "Remarks on the Middle East," June 24, 2002. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=73320>, and George W. Bush: "The President's News Conference With President Aleksander Kwasniewski of Poland," July 17, 2002. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=73071> (both accessed 28 April 2014).

<sup>570</sup> "Higher calling" in Dmitri, "Frontier Justice," 12.

<sup>571</sup> Bush interview in Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002) quoted in Dmitri, "Frontier Justice," 17.

outriders of freedom would “rid the world of evil.”<sup>572</sup> Here Marshall Sahlins contention that major events can cause characteristics of a social/cultural structure to modify and transform is demonstrated once again. And now it was not only America’s enemies in specific nations which needed to be vanquished before the homeland of old could be restored, but *all* enemies around the globe (LBJ by contrast had, at one point, held global ambitions for his “Great Society”).

Part of President Bush’s tough-guy strategy would be to throw aside those cultural and legal norms which he believed had prevented Americans from achieving an even playing field in its battle with the forces of darkness. For Bush, America could justify the use of extreme measures against enemies or possible enemies since it was not the same as when other nations used torture or other such methods. The United States, so the Administration’s logic appeared to go, was by nature a moral nation that only tried to protect its people and principles against evil. As a result, its use of extreme measures was moral, because a nation of high principle had used them only under threat from evil people. Like Dirty Harry Callahan, Bush was disgusted with procedural safeguards and international protocols which protected clever and sinister criminals from the severe punishments and harsh disciplinary treatment required to safeguard American society and to bring to justice those who would threaten innocent folks. In this view, torture and abuse of prisoners, denial of legal rights, extensive electronic surveillance, and in some instances even collateral damage were all justified and supported by the Administration. While most liberals were opposed to these measures—arguing that breaking treaties, international laws, and the code of simple human decency made the United States a

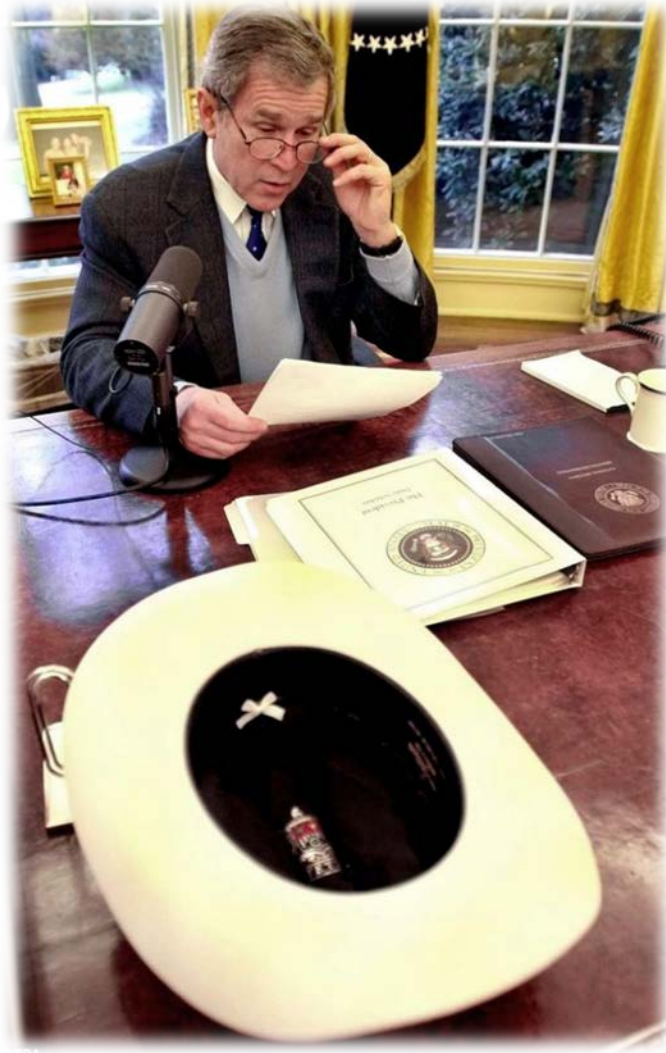
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<sup>572</sup> George W. Bush: "Remarks at the National Day of Prayer and Remembrance Service," September 14, 2001. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=63645> (accessed 25 April 2014).

broken and dishonoured nation—conservatives and, at least initially, the majority of the public agreed that they had to fight fire with fire and appeared inspired by Bush's moral absolutes and blazing certainties.

### **Prairie Chapel Ranch and Frontier Imagery**

Bush 43 deliberately associated, visually, with popular imagery of the Frontier West in several ways. Most significantly in 1999, just as he was about to embark on his 2000 presidential campaign, he purchased a 1,600 acre ranch at "Prairie Chapel" on the plains of central Texas. The ranch created the opportunity for the visual cowboy Bush to be seen wearing his Stetson, jeans and boots while clearing brush on his ranch and driving around in his pickup truck (a working vehicle): this activity was intended to reinforce the message that Bush was a real frontiersman of the ranch. The new Western "digs" also helped him to replace his ancestral connections to the Bush Estate at Kennebunkport, Maine.



**Figure 10.5:** Bush's white Stetson appears on his Oval Office desk as he prepares for a radio address. Unlike TR, LBJ and Reagan, Bush often wore the cowboy attire in Washington: sending the message that whether home on the range in Texas or in Washington, cowboy characteristics were an important part of his persona and identity. (Photographer: Eric Draper, January 27, 2001. George W. Bush Presidential Library)

Bush spent 490 days of his presidency at the Ranch near Crawford, Texas, considerably more time than the year Reagan spent at Rancho del Cielo. He entertained dignitaries much more than Reagan as well. According to *The Washington Post*, 18 foreign leaders met with Bush at his Crawford ranch, including Russian President

Vladimir Putin, Saudi leader Abdullah, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, and Bush's "truest friend," British Prime Minister Tony Blair.<sup>573</sup> Close allies were awarded with visits to the Bush "frontier" homestead while those who balked at the President's views would have to meet up with him in the urban environment of DC or elsewhere. Amidst a flurry of visits in the Spring and Summer of 2003, *The Daily Show's* Jon Stewart wryly observed of highly skeptical French President Jacques Chirac: "I doubt he'll be coming to the ranch anytime soon."<sup>574</sup>

Interestingly, world leaders sometimes applied even more frontier credentials to Bush than did Bush himself. Vladimir Putin reportedly took horseback riding lessons in preparation for his visit to the President's Cowboy ranch; but upon arriving realized that the President was a self-described "windshield rancher" who rode a pickup truck.<sup>575</sup> Liberal journalists mocked the fact that Bush could not ride a horse, that the 200 head of cattle living on his ranch were owned by other ranchers who leased the property, and that his handlers knew well enough to keep him away from guns (Dick Cheney's ill-fated hunting trip aside) and even firewood. With these "typical cowboyesque skills" all out, one observer wrote: "Ultimately someone came up with the image of George W. Bush using a chain saw—a relatively easy to operate tool—which would provide some kind of action video for the president and the media."<sup>576</sup> But even here Bush's acumen came into question by skeptics. While Ronald Reagan actually did have a practical (along with his political) purpose clearing miles of trails for riding on and also needed firewood, the

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<sup>573</sup> Days at the ranches and visiting leaders as reported by the *Washington Post* in Karen S. Hoffman, "Visual Persuasion in George W. Bush's Presidency," 327.

<sup>574</sup> From *The Daily Show*, Comedy Central Network, May 14, 2003 quoted in West and Carey, "(Re)Enacting Frontier Justice....," 394.

<sup>575</sup> President Bush's "I'm a windshield rancher" self-description is quoted in Gregg Moss and Emily Narvaes, "There Ain't No 'W' in Cattle Ranchin'," *Denver Post*, February 2, 2002: K-02.

<sup>576</sup> Santana, Don. "Cowboy Imagery and the American Presidency: Ride 'Em Brush Cutter!" *CounterPunch*, December 19, 2005, at <http://www.counterpunch.org/2005/12/19/ride-em-brush-cutter/> (accessed June 18, 2012).

*New York Times* could see little point to Bush's efforts "to clear brush and dead trees out of a shadowy hollow...a place he calls 'the amphitheater.'"<sup>577</sup>

After 9/11 the frontier visuals became a much more visible part of President Bush's wardrobe. With the Ranch as Bush's backdrop and bedecked in his Stetson, buckskin jacket, and eel skin cowboy boots embossed with the seal of his office, once again a president called upon the Frontier Myth visuals to communicate substantive information about his leadership style. Only in this case it was a Chief Executive's uniform for fighting terrorism. Bush had invoked those familiar images which invited Americans to think about his hawkish policy and leadership in terms of the Frontier Myth. Likewise, in both speeches and press conferences, what one journalist described as his "John Wayne rhetoric"<sup>578</sup> became much more pronounced among Bush and his inner circle as a means of expressing their determination to bring those behind the attacks and their allies to justice.

Meanwhile at the White House itself, trusted visitors frequently encountered several frontier paintings and statues; Bush's own special attention was focussed on "A Charge to Keep," a painting that he had acquired from W.H.D. Koerner. The President was so taken by it, in fact, that he took the painting's name for his own autobiography.<sup>579</sup> Bush believes that the image depicts circuit-riders who spread Methodism across the Alleghenies during the nineteenth century: that it is the portrayal of a cowboy—who looked a lot like Bush himself—and also of a missionary of his own denomination. But in a case of unwanted irony, the President was incorrect about the title of the painting and

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<sup>577</sup> Steven R. Weisman, "Meanwhile, Back at the Ranch...and Other Vacation Tales: The Presidential Search for the Inner Cowboy," *New York Times*, January 2, 2002: A14, A24.

<sup>578</sup> Liz Marlantes, "More John Wayne Rhetoric Infuses Politics," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 18, 2003, online: <http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0718/p02s02-usfp.html> (accessed 27 October, 2014).

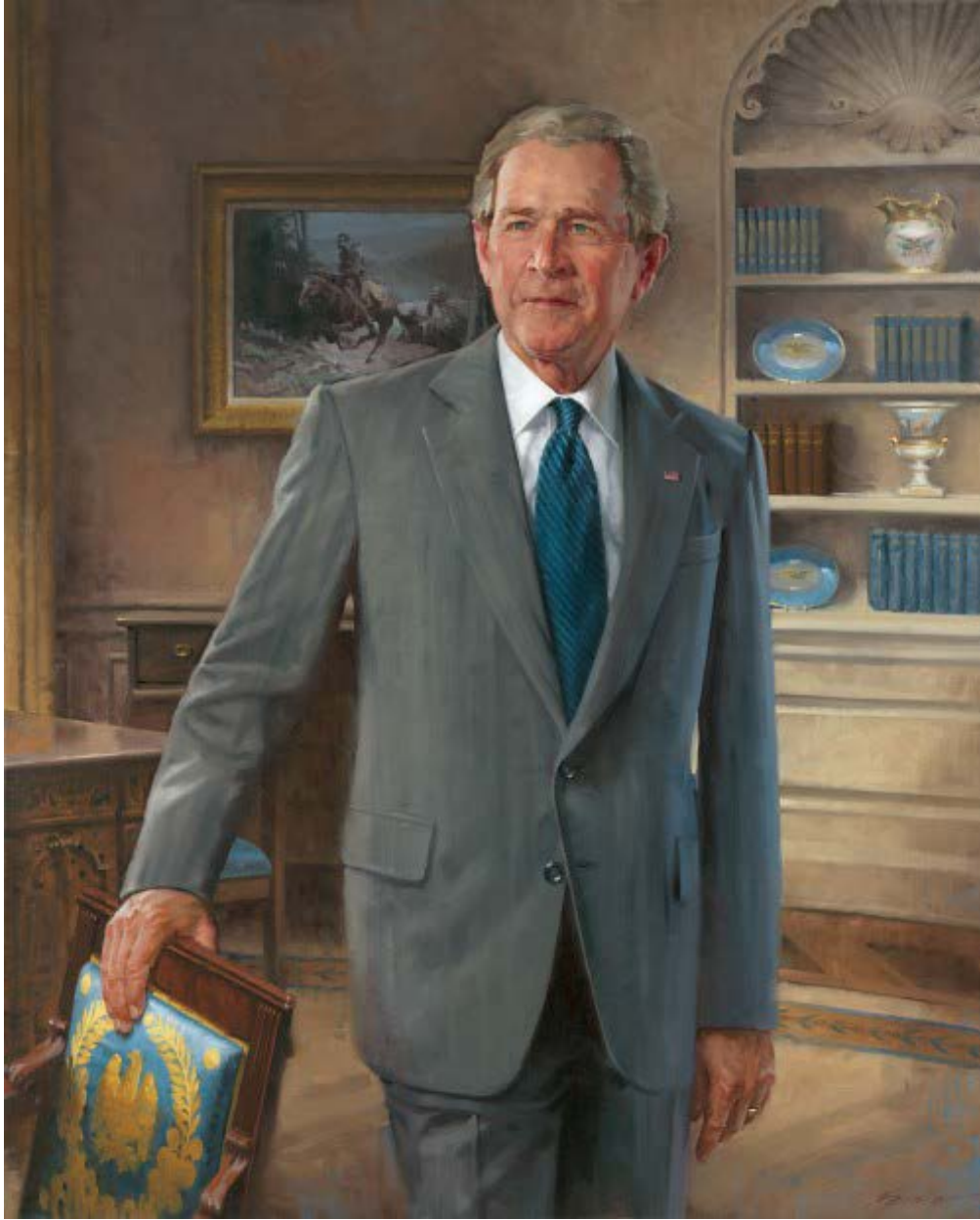
<sup>579</sup> George W. Bush, *A Charge to Keep* (New York: Morrow, 1999).

its meaning. W.H.D. Koerner created the illustration for a Western short story entitled “The Slipper Tongue,” which was published in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1916. Scott Horton of *Harper’s* explains that the story was about “a smooth-talking horse thief who is caught, and then escapes a lynch mob in the Sand Hills of Nebraska.” The painting actually depicts the thief attempting to flee from his captors and the *Post’s* caption read: “Had His Start Been Fifteen Minutes Longer He Would Not Have Been Caught.” Rather than an inspiring evangelical Methodist, then, the man in the painting is actually a horse thief fleeing from a mob who wants him strung up. “The president of the United States,” Horton concludes, “has identified closely with a man he sees as a mythic, heroic figure. In fact that man is a wily criminal one step out in front of justice.”<sup>580</sup>

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<sup>580</sup> Quotations in Scott Horton, “The Illustrated President,” *Harper’s* (January 24, 2008), online article, <http://harpers.org/archive/2008/01/hbc-90002237> (accessed May 31, 2012).





**Figure 10.6:** George W. Bush's official White House Portrait by artist John Howard Sanden. "A Charge to Keep" appears over the President's right shoulder. (White House Collection/ White House Historical Association)

In the real world, trouble came for President Bush with his equally erroneous and premature bragging of "Mission Accomplished" in Iraq—just two months into the invasion. Ray Allen Billington reminded us that "optimism" had always been an "outstanding feature" of the frontier experience but when no weapons of mass

destruction were found, casualties continued to mount, and only a few joined in the “Coalition of the Willing,” skeptics in America toward both the mission and the Bush version of the myth began to multiply. By the end of June 2003 the President’s once firm footing at home had become noticeably shaky.

It was at this point that VP Dick Cheney stepped in to control the damage by deploying the imagery of Cowboy Reagan. Cheney insisted in interviews and meetings with the press that President Bush was doing exactly what Ronald Reagan would have done in Iraq. His repeated key phrase was: “I saw the conviction and moral courage of Ronald Reagan.” Indeed the Reagan comparisons cropped up 21 times in Cheney’s interviews and speechmaking in the latter half of 2003 and this was typically accompanied by the use of Western symbolism.<sup>581</sup> The cowboy talk, Mark West and Chris Carey point out, was hardly coincidental. The coordinated efforts of the two revealed part of a deliberate strategy to deploy the Frontier Myth to the party faithful in stump speeches occurring at vital moments—first early in the war in Afghanistan and now throughout the war in Iraq.

### **The Bush Doctrine and American Exceptionalism**

In a dramatic shift in American foreign policy, President Bush announced in June 2002 a fundamental change from the strategy of containment of America’s enemies (the previous Cold War strategy) to one of pre-emption. The president declared: “Our security will require all Americans to be forward-looking and resolute, to be ready for pre-emptive action when necessary to defend our liberty and to defend our lives.”<sup>582</sup>

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<sup>581</sup> Cheney quoted in West and Carey, (Re)Enacting Frontier Justice,” 392; *Ibid.*

<sup>582</sup> Bush quotation from June 2002 appears on PBS Online, “Frontline: The Evolution of the Bush Doctrine,” <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/iraq/etc/cron.html> (accessed March 25, 2014).

Bush, Cheney and Company's ideas about pre-emptive military action fit with the view that problems on the frontier required a quick and decisive response to be resolved. Like the pioneers, frontiersman and cowboy of popular myth, Bush claims the right to self-defense, only here he extends it to authorizing the pre-emptive attacks against potential aggressors and the goal of cutting them off before they are able to attack the United States. The Frontier Myth structure—throttled by the events of 9/11—would now be pushed to the edge with respect to promoting action prior rather than in response to specific perceived crises. American forces in Afghanistan and later Iraq would not be an invasion but an act of self-defense. To defend the United States, Bush had to show his steely cowboy determination: that he meant what he said and that he meant business. And Bush was not willing to wait for others to help. He would dispense with geopolitics and go with his “instincts” to act first and think later. “The Bush Doctrine is actually being defined by action, as opposed to by words,” Bush told NBC's Tom Brokaw in a 2003 interview on board Air Force One.<sup>583</sup>

Rejecting the collective security approach embraced by liberals for most of the twentieth century, Bush insisted on the right of the United States to go it alone decisively in the face of a perceived threat against itself. His belief in “self-reliant” unilateralism supposedly reflected the frontiersman's tough mindedness and independence and meant there would be little compromise with allies. When the Bush Administration lost the UN Security Council vote in 2003 and was denied authorization to launch a war against Iraq, it rejected the international rules and rustled up a small “coalition”—a posse that would go it alone. Britain under Prime Minister Tony Blair was

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<sup>583</sup> Bush quoted from interview with Tom Brokaw in Mike Allen and Romesh Ratnesar, “The End of Cowboy Diplomacy,” *Time* [cover story, Canadian Edition], Vol. 168, Issue 3, July 17, 2006: 14.

the United States one major stalwart ally during the Iraq War. *The Guardian* described Britain's involvement in a discussion of the grounds for war as follows: "The truth is that Tony Blair is going into this inquiry the way he went into the war itself: as Tonto to the American Lone Ranger."<sup>584</sup>

The Bush Doctrine of pre-emption also emphasized its willingness to act individually *without* allies when necessary. Bush's unilateral implementation of action at the UN prompted Jack Kelly of the *Pittsburgh-Post Gazette* to compare the President to Will Kane—the brave but isolated sheriff of *High Noon*.<sup>585</sup> Kelly writes that "Bush's U.N. speech on Saddam Hussein eerily resembled the script of the greatest Western of all time, *High Noon*." Kelly misread the anti-McCarthyism message of the film-makers themselves; instead he and many others on the right, including Bush himself, saw this go-it-alone foreign policy as representing the "individualism" strand of the Frontier Myth. Ron Grossman of the *Chicago Tribune* agreed with this popular perception: "His [Bush's] is a vision of pioneer America, where sturdy frontiersmen didn't wait for the government. They went out and tamed the wilderness with their own two hands."<sup>586</sup> Related to this, the President claimed morality was at stake. "At some point," Bush said, "we may be the only ones left. That's okay with me."<sup>587</sup> In practice, Bush's unilateralist approach to the international community was not only demonstrated in Iraq, but also in his decisions to abandon the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with Russia (originally signed with the Soviet Union), against widespread objections; refusal to offer any

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<sup>584</sup> Freedland, Jonathon. "Don't Be Fooled Again." *The Guardian*, February 4, 2004, <http://www.commondreams.org/views04/0204-07.htm> (accessed 25 February 2014).

<sup>585</sup> Jack Kelly, "Bush Re-enacts 'High Noon' at the United Nations," *Pittsburgh-Post Gazette*, September 18, 2002: B3.

<sup>586</sup> Ron Grossman, "Taking Apart the New Deal," *Chicago Tribune*, April 13, 2003, Section 2.1, p. 5 quoted in Dmitri, "Frontier Justice," 24.

<sup>587</sup> Bob Woodward, *Bush at War*, p.81, quoted in Dmitri, "Frontier Justice," 24.

endorsement of the Kyoto accord on global warming; and his insistence that the United States would not be participating in the International Criminal Court. To an even greater degree than Ronald Reagan, Bush saw the demands of an individual nation (America) on the international stage as trumping those of cooperation in the global community. With Bush we have another example of a President attempting to push the parameters of the myth to new limits in response to broader events.

George W. Bush's Administration also hoped to promote itself as representing the kinds of values associated with *The Magnificent Seven* or *Shane*:<sup>588</sup> with the United States in the role as the mythic protector of innocents in the global community against the bad guy terrorists. The gifted individuals featured in these two movies have both the power and the responsibility to act—sometimes in the name of the community—but even against the will of the community if for their own good. The President knew what was best for the world and his bellicose doctrine allegedly included a sense of responsibility to help weaker nations that were unable to defend themselves. In his speech of September 20, 2001, he described his vision for American leadership. “The advance of human freedom—the great achievement of our time and the great hope of every time—now depends on us.”<sup>589</sup> As LBJ had once said in relation to his “little booger” allies, the South Vietnamese, Bush said of the Afghanistan mission that “I wanted us to be viewed as the liberator.”<sup>590</sup> In Iraq, meanwhile, he would take down the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein to help the weak and relieve a nation where “there is

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<sup>588</sup> *Shane* (1953) Paramount Pictures, Director: George Stevens, Starring: Alan Ladd, Jean Arthur, Van Heflin, Brandon de Wilde, Jack Palance; *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) MGM, Director: John Sturges, Starring: Yul Brynner, Steve McQueen, Eli Wallach, Charles Bronson, James Coburn.

<sup>589</sup> Bush quotation from September 20, 2001 on PBS Online, “Frontline: The Evolution of the Bush Doctrine,” <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/iraq/etc/cron.html> (accessed March 25, 2014).

<sup>590</sup> Bush quotation from Woodward, *Bush at War* appears in Dmitri, “Frontier Justice,” 27.

immense suffering.”<sup>591</sup> Like Shane and other gunslinger heroes, the President was there to dispense justice in a hostile and highly dangerous post-Cold War world. Unlike some of his more thoughtful cowboy “counterparts,” though, Bush seemed less concerned with thinking actions and their consequences through first and more concerned with doing. And by deploying the Frontier Myth in ways that raised expectations so incredibly high—Bush, Cheney and others were setting themselves and their associations with the myth up for potential disappointment and failure later on.

Significantly, both the Bush Doctrine’s supporters and some of its harshest critics subscribed to the exceptionalist tenets of the Frontier Myth. In *The Folly of Empire*, Bush-basher John B. Judis argues that the President’s pursuit of an American empire in the Middle East was an extreme departure from what the author believed was the nation’s essential tradition of anti-imperialism. Like Turner, Judis asserts that Americans had shunned colonialism, making its experience very different from Old Europe’s. Except for the temporary aberration after the Spanish-American War, Judis’ claims that Americans had adhered to anti-imperial traditions that allowed their westward expansion into a virtually empty continent. For decades, this self-serving and flattering version of history has been challenged by many historians including Norman Graebner and Richard Van Alstyne; and more recently by the New West historians including Richard White and Patricia Limerick.<sup>592</sup> But for many Americans these features of the myth have been too powerful to be displaced by scholars.

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<sup>591</sup> Woodward, *Bush at War*, 339.

<sup>592</sup> John B. Judis, *The Folly of Empire: What George W. Bush Could Learn from Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006; See Norman A. Graebner, *Empire on the Pacific* (Santa Barbara CA: ABC-Clio, 1983); Richard W. Van Alstyne, *The Rising American Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1960). For the “New West” interpretation see White, *It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own* and Patricia Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*. New York: Norton, 1987.

Recently, Dutch historian Jan Willem Schulte Nordholt's analysis of American exceptionalism, *The Myth of the West* (1995), revealed that according to the Frontier Myth, America was the "last empire" but, at the same time, distinct from those previous empires of the European great powers. While these others had risen and fallen, the Frontier Myth ensured their own nation's bright future. The right conditions of time and space had come together, making America—that "city on a hill"—the "last frontier," even the "end of history."<sup>593</sup>

As the conflict in Iraq wore on, the Administration and nation's adherence to the Myth of the West created similar problems for Bush to those that had sunk LBJ. Like Johnson, President Bush kept insisting that the old American hope of "freedom just around the corner" was out there to grasp on these far off frontiers and that democracy and freedom would be the foundation for international peace. Assigning a redemptive role to the United States, he raised great hopes for a brighter future, committed substantial American forces to spread democracy and attain peace but once again miscalculated the outcome in terms of underestimated costs and unanticipated consequences. LBJ biographer Robert A. Divine has written of the Bush Doctrine: "for the United States at least, war is a messy and unpredictable way to deal with international problems. Americans enter into conflicts convinced that they can create a better and more stable world once their enemies are defeated, only to meet with unexpected outcomes and a new set of challenges."<sup>594</sup> It is precisely these unexpected outcomes and challenges which would overwhelm Bush's Administration during its

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<sup>593</sup> Nordholt's analysis is discussed in Lloyd E. Ambrosius, "Woodrow Wilson and George W. Bush: Historical Comparisons of Ends and Means in Their Foreign Policies," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (June 2006): 517.

<sup>594</sup> Robert A. Divine, *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace*, quoted in Ambrosius, 536.

second term and cause the myth itself to be viewed increasingly as out of touch with the realities of the twenty-first century.

### **George W. Bush: Genuine or Fake Frontier President?**

Americans, and traditional allies overseas, had strong reactions to George W. Bush and his frontier persona. And those Bush Administration policies with the closest ties to the Frontier Myth were also the most hotly contested. Almost immediately after 9/11, Bush enjoyed a dramatic and seemingly united surge in popularity; but as time passed a growing wave of criticism and distrust emerged. Overall, within the United States itself, Bush's frontier persona was initially viewed in a more positive than negative light. But in the post-Reagan era, it produced decidedly more affirmative responses from conservative members of the public and more critical ones from those holding liberal viewpoints.<sup>595</sup>

For supporters of President Bush, his character was one of the qualities that they admired most. At first even those who did not agree with his policies appeared to admire those aspects of Bush's character associated with cowboys. "They might break with President Bush on the war in Iraq or on illegal immigration," observed Timothy Egan of the *New York Times*, "but not with the man himself."<sup>596</sup>

MSNBC's *Hardball* host Chris Matthews, who would later turn vehemently against President Bush, hailed him in May 2003 as epitomizing the national character: "Here's a president who's really nonverbal....He looks great in that cowboy costume he wears when he goes West....We're proud of our President." At the outset of the Iraq War at

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<sup>595</sup> Certainly the interest in "Bush cowboy" has persisted for years; even after he left office a search on YouTube yielded 620 results. See Hoffman, *Visual Persuasion in George W. Bush's Presidency*, 329.

<sup>596</sup> Timothy Egan quoted in Hoffman, *Visual Persuasion in George W. Bush's Presidency*, 332.



least, Matthews saw Bush as an uncomplicated man of few words, a Marlboro Man type and “can-do,” self-reliant “type of guy” with a dislike for the “indoors.”<sup>597</sup> Conservative online articles, such as Andrew Bernstein’s “In Defense of the Cowboy,” similarly lauded Bush’s supposed courage, self-reliance and straight-shooting talk. “What we honor about the cowboy of the Old West,” writes Bernstein, “is his willingness to stand up to evil and to do it alone, if necessary. The cowboy is a symbol of the crucial virtues of courage and independence.” Conversely, Europeans who criticized the United States were described by Bernstein as “worse than the timid shopkeeper in an old Hollywood Western. They don’t merely want to avoid confronting evil—they seek to prevent anyone else from recognizing evil and standing up to it.” Indeed Bernstein argued that the only possible legitimate criticism of the President was that he was not cowboy enough.<sup>598</sup>

In the days following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, American observers enthusiastically embraced frontier exceptionalism by identifying the differences between the United States and “Old Europe.” In a line seemingly drawn right out of the Turner thesis, freelance journalist Wayne Lutz claimed that, as opposed to Europe, America was built by rugged individuals possessing the moral clarity of the frontier folk: men and women who were willing to take risks to carve out a better world for themselves. Writing for the *Sun News*, Kathleen Parker declared that: “The world has become a global Dodge City. Lucky for us, a Wild West sheriff is in charge.” The *National Review*’s William F. Buckley concurred and insisted that Saddam Hussein needed to be ousted from power in Iraq. To do this would take the kind of cowboy thinking where men of action and courage would leave ambiguity behind in favour of

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<sup>597</sup> Chris Matthews quoted in Barry Stephenson, “Swaggering Savagery,” 12.

<sup>598</sup> Andrew Bernstein, “In Defense of the Cowboy,” *Andrew Bernstein website*, <http://andrewbernstein.net/category/articles/> (accessed 30 April 2014).

taking down the evil-doer, as opposed to the kind of cowardice demonstrated by the French and the Germans.<sup>599</sup> Jack Kelly of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, claimed that Bush's 2002 speech to the UN on Hussein resembled the storyline of the film *High Noon*. "If other U.N. members were willing to join the posse," Kelly wrote of the President, "he will be happy to discuss with them how best to enforce the law. But he made clear that he is going to face the man who hates us, even if they will not." Then Kelly added his own assessment of Bush's "Hadleyville on the Hudson" speech: "European sophisticates pride themselves on seeing the world in shades of gray. But when people look at them, all they see are shades of yellow."<sup>600</sup> Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld likewise dismissed the mounting opposition in Germany and France by describing them in mythic terms as "Old Europe," and saying in so many words that, in the Bush White House, the views of these nations no longer mattered.<sup>601</sup> These two tenets of the Frontier Myth—American exceptionalism and its accompanying sense of mission—were very much alive and well among conservative ideologues and others during the early Bush years.

Outside of the United States, George Bush's one major supporter in the Iraq War, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, was described by the President as the United States' "truest friend" and by many in the media as his faithful deputy. In the case of one cartoon, Blair was "faithful Indian companion" Tonto to the Bush's Lone Ranger (as also

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<sup>599</sup> Media quotations appear in Dodwell, "From the Center."

<sup>600</sup> Kelly, "Bush Re-enacts 'High Noon' at the United Nations," B3.

<sup>601</sup> Rumsfeld quoted in David E. Sanger, "To Some in Europe, The Major Problem is Bush the Cowboy," *New York Times* (24 January 2003). Access: <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/24/world/threats-responses-continent-some-europe-major-problem-bush-cowboy.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm&pagewanted=print> (6 February 2014).

described in *The Guardian*).<sup>602</sup> Curiously though, it was Bush's relationship with Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi that was the collaboration most obviously tied to the Frontier Myth. Over a four year period the two men proudly nurtured a common identity as dual inheritors of the legacy of Marshal Kane (Gary Cooper) of the 1952 film, *High Noon*. Their first visit at Camp David had resulted in mutual pronouncements of a new and very positive relationship based on "comparing themselves to the lone, stoic and honor-bound marshal played by [Gary] Cooper."<sup>603</sup> Just two weeks after the terrorist attacks, on September 25, Koizumi visited the White House and left with a framed copy of the film poster for the movie—a gift that the PM said he "treasures." Bush, according to the *Christian Science Monitor*, had "dubbed Koizumi 'Gary Cooper,' after the sheriff of *High Noon*."<sup>604</sup> A few months later, when Bush visited Tokyo in February, Koizumi had two special surprises waiting for him: first a performance of "yabusame," traditional Japanese mounted archery, and then a gift to the American President a drawing of Bush himself performing yabusame on horseback. Prime Minister Koizumi declared that the print was symbolic of "the U.S.-led fight against the evil of terrorism."<sup>605</sup> As one correspondent for a Japanese daily noted, "Koizumi's overnight visit at 'Prairie Chapel' ranch puts him among only a handful of world leaders to meet Bush here, seen as a gesture of thanks for Japanese support for the United States in the Iraq war."<sup>606</sup> Far Eastern Sheriff Koizumi publicly assured the

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<sup>602</sup> Tonto cartoon which appeared in *The Observer* [London] on January 19, 2003 is described in Sanger, "To Some In Europe...."

<sup>603</sup> Quotation from Japan's Kyodo News Agency appears in J. Hoberman, "It's Always 'High Noon' at the White House," *New York Times*, April 25, 2004: AR11.

<sup>604</sup> *Christian Science Monitor* quoted in West and Carey, "(Re)Enacting Frontier Justice," 395.

<sup>605</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>606</sup> *Ibid.*

President that “Gary Cooper fought a lonely battle against a gang, but this time the whole world stands with the United States.”<sup>607</sup>

For President Bush, it was especially important to be able to disseminate his administration’s plans quickly and widely without the added complication of having to explain and rationalize the specifics: the Frontier Myth appeared the ideal vehicle for this. It offered him a tactical tool for articulating his message to a diverse audience that played upon powerful ideas that were already heavily entrenched in American culture. At first, as we have seen, this approach was widely accepted at home and by a small number of leaders abroad. But unlike “Cooper-san,” few national leaders outside the United States and a steadily growing number of Americans viewed George Bush’s frontier persona and “mission,” particularly in Iraq, as authentic or noble. Significantly, like most European citizens, the Japanese public had strongly opposed the Iraq invasion right from the outset.<sup>608</sup> The Frontier Myth was an *American* myth that never held a grip on foreign leaders and the public in other nations as it did at home in the USA. And as the immediate urgency of September 11 faded over time and the Iraq War dragged on, the criticism of Bush grew more and more intense on his home turf as well as the Frontier Myth lost its ability to either explain or motivate.

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<sup>607</sup>Junichiro Koizumi quoted in J. Hoberman, “It’s Always ‘High Noon’ at the White House,” AR11. Likewise the Kyodo News Agency’s reported that the Japanese Prime Minister “summed up his admiration for George Bush by likening the United States President to [*High Noon*’s] gun slinging hero....‘High Noon’ tells the tale of a lone, stoic, honor-bound marshal determined to defend his civilized town against barbaric frontier justice [*sic*].” See “High Noon in Tokyo,” *Kyodo News Agency* (Tokyo), February 20, 2002, <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Asian+editorial+excerpts+-+HIGH+NOON+IN+TOKYO.-a084260011> (accessed 29 April 2014); *High Noon*’s writer and producer, Carl Foreman, and most scholars who have analyzed *High Noon* interpret it as a scathing indictment of the “herd instinct” of McCarthyism. See Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*.

<sup>608</sup> Japanese public opinion differed starkly from that of Koizumi. When asked in July 2003 if weapons of mass destruction was “a legitimate reason for the invasion of Iraq” 60% responded in the negative and 25% positive. In October 2005 when asked the question: “has your view of America changed over the past three years?” 17% of Japanese responded that it had improved while 74% said it had worsened. Polling data appears in: Paul Midford, *Japanese Public Opinion and the War on Terrorism: Implications for Japan’s Security Strategy* (Washington DC: East-West Center, 2006): 42, 48.

These fissures were clearly in evidence during Bush's second term. Liberals and, as time passed, moderates as well pointed to serious inconsistencies in Bush's handling of foreign affairs. For these folks Will Kane was a more thoughtful, reluctant hero who did a job that needed to be done out of a sense of obligation rather than John Wayne style guns blazing, bravado. To critics, Bush (along with Cheney and Rumsfeld) seemed increasingly intent on forcing his will on others, even when most of the world wanted no part of his invasion of Iraq. Just as galling to those holding on to the older liberal version of the myth: Bush appeared to be using faux cowboy credentials and methods to conjure up public support. Some liberal American critics at home challenged the idea directly that Bush genuinely adhered to frontier values and found his cowboy atmospherics so artificial that it undermined his overall legitimacy. Eric Baard of the *Village Voice* pulled no punches in 2004: "George Bush is a fake cowboy. From media accounts, you'd reckon that the president was a buckaroo to the bones. He plays up the image, big-time, with \$300 designer cowboy boots, a \$1,000 cowboy hat...."<sup>609</sup> His purchase of a ranch just before his presidential campaign only reinforced Baard and others' belief that it was all for the sake of Bush manipulating the Frontier Myth in order to also manipulate his own imagery. Buying a ranch, clearing brush and wearing cowboy attire did not make him a Western hero. Deana Duke Arbuckle also insisted in her 2003 column in *The Oregonian* that "this president is no cowboy." Arbuckle, herself married to a retired cowman, explained that a genuine cowboy "tends to his own herd and his own land. He mends his own fences. He never intrudes on his neighbor

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<sup>609</sup> Baard, Erik. "George Bush Ain't No Cowboy," *Village Voice* (September 28, 2004).

without an invitation. He makes a good neighbor...he minds his own business and wouldn't tell the people next door how to live.”<sup>610</sup>

Some of those Americans most critical of Bush also invoked popular culture manifestations of the Frontier Myth. In two editorials which analyzed how Bush fit or *should* fit into the Western hero's image, the President fared poorly. In the *All-American Post*, published by the Vietnam Veterans and Airborne Press, the editor asserted that George W. Bush should “examine his cowboy image” and gain support through his much more deliberate approach immediately after 9/11 rather than emulating Clint Eastwood in *Unforgiven* as he was doing in the days leading up to the Iraq War. The latter Bush was compared to a surly Eastwood announcing cruel threats as he left town. The publisher of the *Anniston Star* wrote in a similar vein that the Bush administration had “blurred the quiet cowboy as a self-defining allegory” by being more like a “bad-humored 20-foot American cowboy [who] tells the whole saloon he's going to drill the 3-foot bad guy, who doesn't stand a chance.” Like Gary Cooper, the *Anniston Star* contended, Americans looked up to the image fulfilled by Sheriff Kane in *High Noon*: the thoughtful, quiet cowboy who fought only when an outlaw forced him to take action to defend what was right. The frontier cowboy of *The Virginian* or *High Noon* had been one who demonstrated self-restraint and quiet confidence. He did not swagger or exude arrogance but recognized his own vulnerability. But these critics and others noted that this was not the image that Bush, VP Cheney and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld were conveying at all. Susan Faludi of the *New York Times* called Bush out directly: “The president's actions have violated the basic terms of the American Western

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<sup>610</sup> Arbuckle quoted in Donald C. & Elizabeth M. Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, “Like a Cowboy: Imagery in Politics, Prose and Reality,” <http://www.nationalcowboymuseum.org/research/cms/Exhibits/LikeaCowboy/tabid/142/Default.aspx> (accessed 8 August 2009).

romance and, thereby, the terms by which we call ourselves Americans. He's declared war on a foundational national myth." Here was perhaps the most forthright example of a journalist apparently attempting to reassert the liberal Frontier Myth by insisting that the Republican President and those on the right were acting in direct opposition the myth's ideals. If many conservatives had supported forceful, unilateral action, liberals increasingly saw this as a mistake by an unchecked President who had taken the myth to extremes and by association inflicted severe damage on the myth's viability and persuasiveness.<sup>611</sup>

Over the first two years of Bush's second term, HBO ran the highly acclaimed Western, *Deadwood*, created and produced by David Milch – a former Yale fraternity brother of the President himself. In many ways the series reflected the milieu of Bush's second term, the War in Iraq and the intrusions of the Office of Homeland Security with its frequent scenes of violence being employed at levels and disproportionate to the incidents that provoked it, an emphasis on property rights even in the absence of law, and a skeptical view of government as predatory at all levels. Significantly, in contrast to *Open Range* and *Hidalgo* of Bush's first term, Milch intended *Deadwood* as a corrective to what he considered to be the varnished mythologies of the West created by Hollywood. As one interviewer put it: "As you watch 'Deadwood', you find yourself believing in this moral relativism."<sup>612</sup> By his second term, the varnish was wearing off of Cowboy Bush's Administration to a growing degree in the minds of academics, the media, and the public.

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<sup>611</sup> Parts of this paragraph are paraphrased and quotations taken from Dodwell, "From the Center"; Susan Faludi, "An American Myth Rides Into the Sunset," *New York Times*, March 30, 2003: WK13.

<sup>612</sup> Heather Havrilesky, "The Man Behind 'Deadwood'," *Salon.com*, March 5, 2005. Online at: <http://www.salon.com/2005/03/05/milch/> (accessed 12 May 2015).

In Europe, much of the media's critical reaction to Bush's style of diplomacy was summed up in 2005 by Yale diplomatic historian John Lewis Gaddis. He wrote in *Diplomatic History* that "President Bush's decision to invade Iraq [despite widespread foreign criticism] provoked complaints that great power was being wielded without great responsibility, followed by an unprecedented collapse of support for the United States abroad. From nearly universal sympathy in the weeks after September 11, Americans within a year and a half found their country widely regarded as an international pariah."<sup>613</sup> So for many of America's allies, then, the US became the Miller gang coming to terrorize the town (Iraq) rather than Will Kane reluctantly but bravely and rightly staying to protect it. Within a year and a half of 9-11, Bush's invitation seemed to have more in common with *The Magnificent Seven's* bully Calvera terrorizing Mexican villages than with Yul Brynner's Chris and his coalition of six more than willing states reluctantly coming to town to deal with the evil terrorists. As early as May 2002, when the President travelled to Germany to try to obtain support in Europe for a war in Iraq, *NBC Nightly News* reported that the "German media are portraying Bush as a Rambo-like cowboy intent on going after Saddam Hussein with or without Europe's support."<sup>614</sup> This was not the charming LBJ Ranch-style Frontier Myth that had been presented to Chancellor Erhard back in 1963 but instead an arrogant, reckless and aggressive Presidential gunslinger who was out of his league and a danger rather than a protector of international stability. The next year, the then editor of the *Daily Mirror* in London, Piers Morgan, complained that Bush's version of the cowboy centred on a domineering man of action who always had to get his way. "I think people look at him

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<sup>613</sup> John Gaddis quoted in Lloyd E. Ambrosius, "Woodrow Wilson and George W. Bush," 523.

<sup>614</sup> *NBC's* Cameron Brown quoted in Dodwell, "From the Center."



[Bush] and think John Wayne. We in Europe like John Wayne, we liked him in cowboy films. We don't like him running the world."<sup>615</sup> During Bush's first term, then, Frontier Myth served as an interpretive framework for Americans but not for non-Americans in other nations. By his second term, the post-9/11 myth that his administration had nurtured would falter with Americans as well.



**Figure 10.7:** By 2005, George W. Bush's approach to foreign policy had become the target of increasing ridicule and derision from mainstream cartoonists and editorialists not only

<sup>615</sup> Piers Morgan quoted in *Ibid.*

**abroad but within the United States itself. The conservative Frontier Myth that had worked with considerable effectiveness within the United States for more than three years was in trouble.** ("Baby Bush," Daryl Cagle, May 8, 2005. Reproduced with permission of *Daryl Cagle's Political Cartoons.com*; #15531)

From 2001 through the 2004 Presidential election, overall support for Bush held as conservatives and independents, initially, accepted Bush's version of the Frontier Myth and his contention that he had kept the nation secure after 9/11 with his posse in the Middle East and tough vigilance at home. In what may have been key to the election's outcome, 54% of voters polled believed that Americans were better protected and safer from terrorism than they were four years earlier while 41% believe that they were less safe.<sup>616</sup> The majority of Americans in early November 2004, still accepted the need for an aggressive and mostly unilateralist approach to foreign relations using overwhelming gunman force to ensure security at home and the promotion of American interests abroad.

In its first term, the Bush Administration had pushed the structural parameters of the conservative Frontier Myth to new limits. Bush had shifted foreign policy on world frontiers from one of containment to a policy of pre-emption. High expectations for success in spreading American style democracy in the Middle East—and to rid *the world* of evil—proved impossible to fulfill. And Cowboy Bush, unlike Shane or the Virginian, was not slow to anger but instead promoted hard-charging, violent action to head off trouble in Iraq—for reasons that proved false—rather than responding to a crisis. Even after losing the UN Security Council vote on Iraq, the inflexible, optimistic Bush went ahead and raised his own invasion posse. LBJ though likewise proceeding on false

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<sup>616</sup> 2004 Presidential Election exit polling data from November 3, 2004 appears [in German] in Helmut Norpoth, "Mission Accomplished: Die Wiederwahl von George W. Bush," [The Re-Election of George W. Bush], *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* (March 2005): Vol. 46, No. 1: 5.

pretense with the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, had at least tacit support from most of the US allies in Vietnam. And Bush's "self-reliant" unilateralist approach to the international community also encompassed missile testing, environmental issues and the international criminal court. President Bush's determination to act first and think through the consequences later—using the conservative myth's tropes of American exceptionalism, individualism, and six-gun justice—was also in contrast to the strategic thinking and "speak softly" approach of Frontier President Theodore Roosevelt a century before and even diverted from the style of his idol, Ronald Reagan, who was in terms of the actual *use* of force, a compromising and cautious conservative.

In the mid-2000s decade, when events abroad and at home spiraled out of control and beyond the limits of American power, support for Bush's policies faltered at home. Foreign nations, especially in Europe, had already resented the Bush Administration's insistence on its supremacy over the "Old World" and put little if any stock in the conservative, American Frontier Myth's explanations and accommodations of Bush's post-9/11 foreign policy. For non-Americans living in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the myth itself was foreign. Liberals who had still revered liberal elements of the Myth from the pre-hinge era of *Shane* and *The Magnificent Seven* had likewise found these thoughtful elements noticeably absent from George W. Bush's "Dirty Harry", vigilante approach that now included torture, abuse of prisoners abroad, and extensive electronic surveillance. When his policies both at home and abroad stalled out these same liberals, and some moderates as well, became even more openly hostile toward their "fake" cowboy President. The events of the Iraq War were crushing the Frontier Myth's interpretive persuasiveness and sapped the vision of its power to be an explanatory narrative through which the world could be understood. Ironically, Bush found himself

in a similar position with Iraq that LBJ had found himself in with Vietnam vis a vis the Frontier Myth.

As events in the Middle East and the economy at home seemed to worsen in 2005-06, even conservative Americans increasingly perceived the Frontier Presidency as having failed under Bush—though the myth itself would endure for them, be it in a familiar and reassuring, if re-tooled, form. This revised version of the conservative myth would appeal to those further right than George W. Bush and employ a previous GOP icon to do so: re-imagined to match the particular values and goals of early 21<sup>st</sup> Century conservatives.

As we shall see, in his second term, changing historical events and circumstances both at home and abroad, along with presidential discourse that no longer seemed to match these events, pulled the momentum away from Bush and forced the Frontier Myth “brand” to fall back on its pre-9/11 Republican default - Ronald Reagan; the overt conservative expressions caused many liberals and many moderates put further distance between themselves and this incarnation of the Frontier Myth as they came to perceive it as incapable of explaining the reality of the 21<sup>st</sup> century world and a betrayal of the more inclusive frontier mythology of TR and LBJ; and, in the years to follow, both political parties would respond very differently to the power of the Frontier Myth, become increasingly polarized and entrenched in their positions, and create a tidal wave of political crises and impasses in Washington that persist to the present day.

## **XI.**

### **The Decline of Conservatism and the Frontier Myth**

“Cowboy diplomacy, RIP.”  
-- *Time* magazine (July 17, 2006)

During his first term in office, George W. Bush used the Frontier Myth to great advantage to promote a war that was based on poor intelligence and had obvious connections with American corporate oil interests. As reflected in films like Disney’s *Hidalgo*, millions of Americans became convinced through the frontier rhetoric of the Bush Administration that, once again, the United States would set out to provide an example to the world by facing down treachery, demonstrating the superiority of American values (which the oppressed people of the Middle East would naturally embrace), and achieving a happy ending. So long as Americans remained true to the ethics that had allowed them to conquer the frontier “other” or, in Bush’s own language, “evil-doers” of the Middle East—from Al Qaeda, to the Taliban to Saddam Hussein—these enemies would be destroyed so that American democracy and civilization could bring hope and liberty to the troubled region.

But this generation was not the post-World War II generation, and with their history of experience in Vietnam a larger segment of the American public were now more inclined than in earlier decades to question the validity of these adventures once it

became obvious their side was not winning. This skepticism set in increasingly as claims of “mission accomplished” in Iraq by their president in Iraq proved hollow. By the mid-2000s decade, the conservative myth’s explanation for events and claims of their inevitable victory over lesser nations were unraveling. Given the fact that George W. Bush came to the White House with the intention of paring down America’s commitments around the globe, it is ironic that after 9/11 this “reluctant sheriff” would lead a massive commitment of American resources abroad that would include a full scale invasion of Iraq. After successfully ousting Saddam Hussein, the United States immediately began dropping the ball in its efforts to bring order and stability to that troubled nation. Whatever damage was done to America’s reputation during the invasion itself, the damage done in the years that followed was much greater. Ultimately, the War on Terror would come to be viewed more as a source of division than of unity. “In a fracturing world,” Robert Kagan observed in *Foreign Affairs*, “the only thing worse than a self-absorbed hegemon is an incompetent self-absorbed hegemon.” Polls show that Bush’s popularity at home peaked at close to 90% after 9/11, but fell at an almost steady rate throughout the rest of his Administration: bottoming out at under 30% a few weeks before he left office.<sup>617</sup> By 2005 and 2006 it was becoming increasingly evident that the “civilizing values” of American society were not taking hold in Iraq or the Arab world: Osama Bin Laden had not been “brought to justice”; with the dictator Hussein gone and no weapons of mass destruction found, Iraq began fracturing into opposing sects with a long history of hatred for one another; and the toll in

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<sup>617</sup> American diplomat Richard Haass quoted in Robert Kagan, “The September 12 Paradigm: America, the World, and George W. Bush,” *Foreign Affairs* (2008): 29; *Ibid* 36; Polling figures translated from Jurgen Wilzewski, “Lessons to Be Learned”: Die Bush-Doktrin, der Irakkrieg und die präventive Weltordnungspolitik der USA,” *American Studies*, Vol. 53, No. 3, Die-Bush-Administration: Eine erste Bilanz (2008): 357.

American and civilian lives and treasure spent as the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan ground on with no end in sight. Except among some conservatives, George Bush's deployment of the frontier myth had lost its interpretive power, and as such the events which had precipitated the use of the myth needed to be explained in new ways; the Frontier Myth had been, as during the Vietnam War, transformed.

One important lesson that Republicans *had* learned from the experience in Vietnam that helped enable the Bush frontier myth to endure for a time, however, was the importance of transforming every soldier into a heroic symbol of America: a cavalry man defending and civilizing the frontier. Support the soldier out there on the Middle East frontier became equated with patriotism, and patriotism by default with supporting the president's policies. By linking support for the troops to support of their own policies, Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and company could stifle criticism among conservative Americans in particular and some centrists as well. The differing reactions to this patriotic strain of the Frontier Myth emerged with intensity and clarity in popular culture, in particular in the American music industry.

### **Popular Music Responses to 9/11 and the War in Iraq**

In popular music, noticeable schisms developed between American conservatives and liberals of the post-9/11 era. The conservative response, led by country and western singer Toby Keith, was based on determination to rally around the president, salute the troops, crush the enemy, and extract revenge. Beginning in 2002, Keith made several trips to the Middle East to show his encouragement and support to American military personnel serving on or near the front lines. "My father was a soldier. He taught his kids to respect veterans," Keith told reporters for the *American Forces Press*. "It's that

respect and the thank-you that we have a military that's in place and ready to defend our nation; our freedom."<sup>618</sup> In "Courtesy of The Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)" Keith celebrated American resolve and the bombing of Afghanistan with the line: "Man we lit up your world, like the fourth of July." He then went on to describe his own version of country vengeance with the lyrics:

Oh, justice will be served: and the battle will rage  
This big dog will fight, when you rattle his cage.  
An' you'll be sorry that you messed with the U.S. of A  
Cos' we'll put a boot in your ass, it's the American way.<sup>619</sup>

Toby Keith went on to endorse the re-election of President Bush in the 2004 presidential campaign and performed at a rally in Dallas on the night before the election.

The conservative myth could accommodate Toby Keith. Especially during the first term of the Bush Administration, the response from the right and from some elements in the centre—like that from Keith—was to support and not to critique actions abroad. This resurgent myth included a strong sense of American exceptionalism, superiority of American institutions, freedom, self-reliance, and an obligation to enforce the American way on those who caused trouble around the world. When Keith sang of putting "a boot in your ass" in reference to rogue nations and terror groups, his lyrics resonated perfectly with the new contours of the Frontier Myth being tapped into by the Bush Administration.

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<sup>618</sup> Toby Keith quoted in Michael Greenberger, "Toby Keith Entertains Troops in Afghanistan" (28 April 2009), *American Forces Press Service* online.

<sup>619</sup> Toby Keith, "Courtesy of The Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)" lyrics, online at *Cowboy Lyrics.com*: < <http://www.cowboylyrics.com/lyrics/keith-toby/courtesy-of-the-red-white-and-blue-10125.html> > (accessed 24 October 2015).



By contrast, when the Dixie Chicks lead singer Natalie Maines told fans at a London gig that “We’re ashamed that the president of the United States is from Texas” because of his actions in Iraq, country and western websites responded by lambasting the Chicks and dubbing them “Saddam’s Angels.” The cowboy myth of the early Bush years could *not* accommodate the Chicks. Numerous radio stations stopped playing their music and encouraged listeners to boycott their American tour and toss their Dixie Chicks CD’s into trash bins.<sup>620</sup> Toby Keith even used a stage backdrop with a doctored photo of Maines and Saddam Hussein in romantic embrace. If the Chicks represented the left’s version of the Frontier Myth—that good cowboys don’t bully and best let their neighbors alone—much of the nation was in no mood to hear their message. The recent events of September 11<sup>th</sup> followed by the intensity of War in Iraq had left the majority of Americans with little inclination, in the short-term, toward self-criticism. “We’re a great nation. We’re a nation of resolve,” Bush reminded the American people. “We will rid the world of evil-doers.”<sup>621</sup>

Toby Keith and the Chicks arguably represented some of the more polarized responses to Bush’s brand of frontier justice. Perhaps most indicative of the general mood of the nation as a whole, at least directly following the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, was the music of Bruce Springsteen. Since the late 1970s, Springsteen’s lyrics engaged in the impact of events on individuals and communities. *The Rising* (2002), in keeping with this long-standing approach, was intended to bring healing to the nation. As literature

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<sup>620</sup> Natalie Maines quoted and boycott described in detail in: Martin Cloonan, “Musical Responses to September 11<sup>th</sup>: From Conservative Patriotism to Radicalism.” *9/11 – The Free World is Out of Tune*, Dietrich Helms and Thomas Phelps, eds. Online chapter on *Freemuse*, < <http://freemuse.org/archives/431> > (accessed 23 October 2015).

<sup>621</sup> George W. Bush: “Remarks on Arrival at the White House and an Exchange With Reporters,” September 16, 2001. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=63346> (accessed 11 January 2016).

and music scholar David Carithers describes it, the album is “a work of romantic pragmatism” since it enables listeners to engage and work through their feelings “of hopelessness, grief, divisiveness, and hatred...” before they turned to “renewed strength, love, and hope for reconciliation.”<sup>622</sup> Before long, though, Springsteen would move away from this relative neutrality and take a decidedly liberal and critical stance toward US policy abroad and at home, rejecting key components of Bush’s version of the frontier myth. Within five years, the political evolution of the Boss’s music during the 2000s decade saw his bi-partisan and sorrowful post-9/11 album *The Rising* replaced by his open disappointment and recrimination toward the Bush Administration in *Magic* (2007).

By George W. Bush’s second term in office, Springsteen had become “committed to politically judging” events at home and abroad including an outright rejection of the conservative Frontier Myth.<sup>623</sup> As one critic observed, his song “Livin’ in the Future” was a biting commentary on “cowboy ethics and aggression” of the Bush White House.<sup>624</sup> In the opening line of “Gypsy Biker,” meanwhile, soldiers became little more than pawns in Bush and Cheney’s wars fought for the oil industry: “The speculators made their money on the blood you shed.”<sup>625</sup> And the ultimate critique of the War in Iraq was inherent in the title of his song “Last to Die,” essentially a condensed version of the testimony provided by John Kerry when he returned from Vietnam and asked

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<sup>622</sup> David Carithers quoted in Ian Collinson, “A Land of Hopes and Dreams? Bruce Springsteen & America’s Political Landscape from *The Rising* to *Wrecking Ball*,” *Social Alternatives*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (1 January 2014): 69.

<sup>623</sup> Collinson, “A Land of Hopes and Dreams?,” 70.

<sup>624</sup> Quotation in *Ibid.*

<sup>625</sup> Bruce Springsteen, “Gypsy Biker,” *Magic*, Columbia Records, 2007. Lyrics appear online at: <http://www.springsteenlyrics.com/lyrics/g/gypsybiker.php> (accessed 27 October 2015).

Congress in 1971: “How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?”<sup>626</sup> Iraq and Vietnam and the lyrics and sentiment of Springsteen, were both inextricably linked. A few years after *Magic*, during the 2012 presidential campaign, the Boss’s album *Wrecking Ball* continued to remind fans of the failings of the Bush conservatives’ version of the Frontier Myth at home. In the ironically titled “We Take Care of Our Own,” The Boss belts out that: “From the shotgun shack to the Superdome, There ain’t no help, cavalry stayed home.”<sup>627</sup> A clear reference to the former President’s bungling of the Hurricane Katrina crisis of 2005.

While the Dixie Chicks were censored and pulverized by many Country and Western music critics earlier in the 2000s, in 2007 Springsteen only seemed “to have been rewarded for his criticism of neoliberalism, certainly in terms of album and ticket sales.”<sup>628</sup> Now, the mood swing of the nation was even identifiable among some who had previously supported the President. That same year Toby Keith disassociated himself with favouring the Iraq War. Asked by *Newsday* if he supported the conflict, Keith responded that he “Never did” and now supported time limits on the campaign.<sup>629</sup> The next year the country and western star lamented how the Democratic Party had “allowed all the kooks in” and spoke to CMT of his admiration for Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin.<sup>630</sup> Like many on the right, with the events not

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<sup>626</sup> John Kerry quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>627</sup> Bruce Springsteen, “We Take Care of Our Own,” released as a single on 12 January 2012. Lyrics appear online at: < <http://www.springsteenlyrics.com/lyrics/w/wetakecareofourown.php> > (accessed 27 October 2015).

<sup>628</sup> Ian Collinson, “A Land of Hopes and Dreams?” 71.

<sup>629</sup> Toby Keith’s January 2007 interview with *Newsday* quoted in “Toby Keith Biography,” *SongsOnLyrics*, online at: < <http://lyrics.songonlyrics.net/toby-keith-biography> > (accessed 27 October 2015).

<sup>630</sup> Darden Beville, “Toby Keith Sticks Up for Sarah Palin,” 6 October 2008, Toby Keith quoted from *The Boot*, online at: < <http://theboot.com/toby-keith-sticks-up-for-sarah-palin/> > (accessed 27 October 2015).

having lived up to the promises, Keith would no longer find interpretive solace in the frontier philosophies of Bush.

### **Bush's Global Six-Guns Go Back in the Holster**

While the American press and public were initially favourable toward Bush's frontier speech rhetoric, as the War in Iraq dragged on and casualties and costs mounted, Americans became much less approving. Bush had promised to bring the perpetrators to justice, but Osama Bin Laden, rather than having been "smoked out" of his cave, was instead allowed to escape from the hills of Afghanistan to somewhere else—presumably Pakistan. Iraqis and Afghans were supposed to embrace democracy and freedom but instead the nations were riddled with sectarian conflict, corruption and chaos. Al Qaeda, though weakened, continued to make its presence known both through the media and in follow up bombing attacks in Madrid and throughout Iraq. The Taliban in Afghanistan, though initially set on the run by the US "cavalry" and its allies, was now on the rebound. And in Iraq, Sunnis, Kurds and Shiites divided the country instead of bringing it together under the democratic elections of a tamed Middle East frontier. The values of freedom, entrepreneurialism, democracy and liberty that the Bush team had promised would follow the "liberation" of these nations had still not come to pass. Simultaneously, by late 2005 and 2006, the magic persuasive power of the Frontier Myth, Bush style, had faded. The myth had not delivered as promised as events did not match the structure that the Bush team had believed in, promoted, and worked so hard to reinforce. Rhetorical uses of frontier mythology no longer seemed capable of persuading Americans that they did not need to understand the complexity of Middle East politics, or that foreign policy could be interpreted through John Wayne's eyes.

Bush too appeared to begin doubting his own approach. In this milieu, his employment of the myth began to noticeably retract.

In a January 2005 interview with Barbara Walters the President said he would now “be more disciplined in how I say things” adding, “I’ll have to be cautious about conveying thoughts in a way that doesn’t send the wrong impressions about our country.”<sup>631</sup> But having earlier deployed a narrow conservative version of the Myth on such a large scale and with such fervor, Bush could not shake his own image of a kind of reckless, international yahoo. If the Frontier Myth still had symbolic power to motivate Americans it was clear, as the previous chapter demonstrated, that Bush had lost the ability to control the myth or to define which western cowboy he was. As much as he may have wanted to be Marshal Matt Dillon, Americans (like their European erstwhile allies) were coming to see Bush more as the uneducated and impulsive cowpuncher who arrived in Dodge after the cattle drive unaware of Matt Dillon’s determination to promote law and order and, as such, hell bent to provoke bar fights and in other ways stir up trouble with people he neither really knew nor understood. For some observers the cozy relationship between powerful oil companies and the Bush Administration caused some Americans to sense skulduggery reminiscent of the corrupt and disgraced banker, Gatewood, in *Stagecoach*. Like the old poster of LBJ picking up his dogs by their ears, Bush was viewed as one who meddled too much in others’ affairs and now the nation was paying the price. The American administration had cowboys, but it did not have a Marshall Dillon. The Administration now understood this too.

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<sup>631</sup> Bush’s interview with Barbara Walters quoted in Malphurs, “The Media’s Frontier Construction of George W. Bush,” 195.

President Bush's measured response to North Korean missile tests in the summer of 2006 seemed to confirm what Gary J. Bass, political scientist at Princeton, calls "doctrinal flameout." *Time* noted: "Put another way: cowboy diplomacy, RIP."<sup>632</sup> Now Victor David Hanson, a senior fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institute, wrote in the conservative *National Review* that "[t]he Beltway consensus is that the beleaguered president has finally learned that he cannot posture as the [L]one [R]anger on the frontier. Instead he has concluded that, in a sophisticated world where all nations are interdependent, there is no place for his 'smoke 'em out,' 'dead or alive' Weltanschauung—or even for those post-9/11 photo-ops in which he drove his pickup around the ranch to chainsaw brush while wearing a Stetson and shades."<sup>633</sup>

Professor Geoff Smith agreed and indicated that the President's Lone Ranger image had exchanged "altruism for arrogance."<sup>634</sup> Inevitably, it seemed, a bold headline "The End of Cowboy Diplomacy" donned the cover of *Time* magazine on July 17, 2006 and featured a George W. Bush bobble-head engulfed in a giant straw cowboy hat.<sup>635</sup> The widely publicized cover and accompanying article seemed to sum up the situation for many of its readers. Frontier Bush was in decline and Democratic presidential nominee candidate Hillary Clinton was among those critics who got plenty of mileage out of the headline. Addressing a large crowd near Oakland, Clinton stated that on her first day as president she would send her diplomats around the world out to deliver the message that "'the era of cowboy diplomacy is over."<sup>636</sup> Now a prominent Democrat was

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<sup>632</sup> Gary J. Bass and *Time* quotations in Allen and Ratnesar, "The End of Cowboy Diplomacy," 14.

<sup>633</sup> Quotation from Victor David Hanson, Geoff Smith and Hillary Clinton from B. Byron Price, "Cowboys and Presidents," *Convergence: Autry National Center Magazine* (Spring/Summer 2008): 65.

<sup>634</sup> Quotation from Geoff Smith in *Ibid.*

<sup>635</sup> *Time*'s attention grabbing "The End of Cowboy Diplomacy" cover is mounted online at: <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,20060717,00.html> (accessed 8 March 2016).

<sup>636</sup> Quotation from Hillary Clinton in *Ibid.*

openly rejecting not just conservative elements of the frontier myth, but the myth's symbolism.

To some degree Hilary Clinton and other Americans, especially on the left, have likely been influenced in their views of the Frontier Myth, either directly or indirectly, not only by events and perceived "failures" of their conservative rivals in the political arena but by the work of New West scholars such as Richard White and Patricia Limerick as well. Limerick, for example, had directly challenged popular beliefs about the Frontier West in her influential book, *The Legacy of Conquest* (1987). Here Limerick picks up on many of the same arguments made three decades earlier by Earl Pomeroy and others, when she contends that Turner had it all wrong. She also asserts that the conquest of the West, with its inherent racism and economic exploitation, had more in common with the legacy of slavery in the South than with claims for the advancement of a superior civilization. Writing in the waning days of the Reagan Administration, she took on Reagan himself by explaining how the President evoked simplified and ethnocentric images of the West. Limerick asserted that while she and other New West scholars "explored conflict, unintended consequences, and complexities in Western history," presidents typically saw "only freedom, opportunity and abundance in the same story."<sup>637</sup> The lack of impact the New West historians were having in the late Eighties was lamented by Limerick herself, who confessed that their published efforts had "not rippled out to residents or the public."<sup>638</sup> But in the wake of Iraq and other foreign frontier quagmires, these revisionist arguments appear to be gaining more traction among liberals and some moderates again in the twenty-first century.

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<sup>637</sup> Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*, 324.

<sup>638</sup> *Ibid.*

## **America Gets Bush-whacked in Iraq and at Home**

The Frontier Myth failed to be able to deal with and accommodate 9/11, consequently the Bush Doctrine failed most blatantly in the particular place that the U.S. tried to apply it. The myth's assertion that America was an exceptional country and that those who opposed the values that their nation stood for—freedom, democracy, and liberty—were the United States' enemies rang hollow as U.S. foreign policy. Americans were told through the myth that once Saddam was defeated, Iraqis would quickly embrace these values. At first the war went well. Iraq's army was quickly defeated and Saddam deposed and captured. Vice President Dick Cheney assured Americans that the Iraqis would welcome the American and British forces as liberators and that Iraq would soon be the beacon for democracy in the Middle East.<sup>639</sup> But instead Americans were viewed by most as conquerors.<sup>640</sup> Iraq's Shiites and Sunnis were soon at each other's throats and, when they were not fighting each other, waged a war of liberation against the United States. American casualties mounted and Bush was "dumbfounded."<sup>641</sup> By the end of Bush's presidency the war would cost 4,200 Americans killed and more than ten times that number wounded. About 100,000 Iraqis had been killed and the war had cost more than a trillion dollars.<sup>642</sup> Much of the media and public were also sickened by the harsh torture methods used against "the enemy" along with reported abuses at Abu

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<sup>639</sup> Tim Russert interview with Vice President Dick Cheney, Meet the Press, NBC News, March 16, 2003, transcript online at: <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/bush/cheneymeetthepress.htm> (accessed 29 October 2014).

<sup>640</sup> See interview with Iraqi political scientist Azhar Abdul-Karim Abdul-Wanab in Mark Kukis, *Voices from Iraq, 2003-2009: A People's History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

<sup>641</sup> Farber, *The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism*, 248.

<sup>642</sup> *Ibid*, 251.



Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay prisons.<sup>643</sup> Good cowboys like Gene Autry would never tolerate, let alone endorse, such atrocities and abuses. In time, Americans had come to understand that his terrible carnage had been the result of “poor intelligence” as Bush Administration assumptions about weapons of mass destruction and links between Iraq and Al Qaeda—the two primary rationales for the invasion from the outset—proved to be false. Over time the frontier myths ability to sustain American support for the war faltered...then collapsed.

The Frontier Myth’s eventual inapplicability to both Presidents Lyndon Johnson and George W. Bush was keenly identified by some members of the press and scholars as well. *USA Today* founder Al Neuharth advised Bush to follow the lead of another cowboy president: “Maybe Bush should take a cue from a fellow Texan, former president Lyndon Baines Johnson [who] after mismanaging the Vietnam War...turned tail and rode off into the sunset of his Texas ranch.”<sup>644</sup> Events that had rendered earlier expressions of the myth less viable to Democrats in the 1960s and ‘70s would do much the same for the George W. Bush Republicans in the 2000s. But this time there was a twist as conservative Bush’s “Frontier” approach was being compared unfavourably to Ronald Reagan’s. Historian Douglas Brinkley, for example, likened Bush to a poker play “who bet all his chips on Iraq, and it hasn’t come out the way he wanted.” Brinkley points out the difference with Cowboy Reagan: “When terrorists blew up the Marine

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<sup>643</sup> Mark Danner, “We Are All Torturers Now,” *New York Times* (January 6, 2005) online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/06/opinion/06danner.html?pagewanted=1&r=0> (accessed 29 October 2014).

<sup>644</sup> Al Neuharth, “Should Cowboy Bush Ride into the Sunset?” *USA Today*, May 13, 2004, at <http://archive.truthout.org/article/al-neuharth-should-cowboy-bush-ride-into-sunset> (accessed June 18, 2012).

barracks in Lebanon, Reagan was frustrated and furious, as Bush was after 9/11. But he didn't stick us in a war with no exit."<sup>645</sup>

The impotence of Bush's cowboy symbolism in war was not the only reason that Americans were growing suspicious of the president's ability to effectively lead. Compounding Bush's troubles was Mother Nature in the form of Hurricane Katrina, and as the Administration had by now determined, shooting from the hip at men in black hats provided little comfort or respite from Katrina. The event of Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf States in late August 2005 killing nearly 2,000 Americans (almost half as many as had died in Iraq) and leaving hundreds of thousands homeless. The relief effort was miserable and Americans were not pleased by what they saw on their TV sets and their laptops. Some likely wondered if conservatives' antigovernment rhetoric had gone too far and become part of the problem.<sup>646</sup> Despite the happy stories Reagan had told, in the case of Katrina a strong government that could take control was not the problem, it was the solution, and the conservative Frontier Myth provided no corrective models from Bush to draw upon. If epic fails in foreign affairs and disaster relief were not enough, the unexpected collapse of the economy would come to overshadow even the War on Terror in the 2008 presidential election bid. The "bonanza" economic policies that George Bush had trumpeted and implemented during his presidency proved to have disastrous results that emerged just months before the election. In a hugely powerful, capital market that had been almost completely deregulated—bringing unprecedented earnings to American bankers and financiers—the wheels fell off and the bubble burst as trillions of dollars in US assets were lost and the world financial system, led by the US, teetered

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<sup>645</sup> Douglas Brinkley quoted in Lou Cannon and Carl M. Cannon, *Reagan's Disciple: George W. Bush's Troubled Quest for a Presidential Legacy*. New York: Public Affairs (2008): 295.

<sup>646</sup> Farber, *The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism*, 251.

on the brink of collapse. The conservative principle of deregulation and belief in the power of the unrestrained free market had, in the end, *caused* the economy to collapse. And to add to Republican woes over time, traditional conservative opposition to equality for a majority of Americans, including women, minorities and gays, had placed them on the wrong side of history. When Bush left office in January 2009, the conservative movement he had led, like the American economy, was in a state of disarray. The events of Iraq and Katrina had proven too much for the narrowly defined conservative Frontier Myth, and its interpretative power as a model for action and a predictor of the future sputtered in disrepute.

### **Cowboy Conservatism in Shambles**

With the complete collapse of Bush's "frontiers for freedom" abroad and prosperity at home, the public's verdict on Dubya at the end of his presidency was overwhelmingly negative. In a December 2008 Pew Research Center survey, just 11% said Bush will be remembered as an outstanding or above average president – by far the lowest positive end-of-term rating for any president since the 1970s. During the Bush years, the government brand took a major beating. In a December 2008 survey nearly two-thirds (64%) of the American public said that his Administration would be more remembered for its failures than for its successes and a plurality of 34% believed that Bush would be remembered in history as a poor president. When asked to describe President Bush in a word, three of the four most common responses in 2008 were negative: "Incompetent," "Honest," "Idiot," and "Arrogant." Except for "Honest" (as some Americans apparently blamed others, and not Bush, for the Administration's falsification of Weapons of Mass Destruction) none of these words had anything in common with the Cowboy Code Bush

had grown up with. Outside of the United States, a 2008 survey by the Pew Global Attitudes Project showed that the majority of respondents in 19 of the 24 nations – including several strong U.S. allies – also had little confidence in Bush as he neared the end of his presidency. The year before, a survey of 45 nations had found anti-American sentiment extensive as well as increasing disapproval for key aspects of American foreign policy.<sup>647</sup>

When Bush first took office in 2001, the GOP had control of Congress as well as the Presidency. But during Bush's second term there was a significant shift in party preferences as a failing war overseas and unregulated, free market economics at home—facilitated with the help of Frontier Myth symbolism—took their toll on George W. Bush and Republican congressional leaders. In the 2006 midterm elections more moderates and independents aligned themselves with the Democratic Party which took control of both the House and the Senate. The public's appetite for military involvement overseas, meanwhile, had dramatically diminished.<sup>648</sup> The most telling poll numbers for Bush personally were his presidential job approval ratings. When asked: "Do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling his job as President?" The response of the American public reached its highpoint of 89% approval and 6% disapproval on September 21-22, 2001. By October of 2008 he stood at a 25% approval and 71% disapproval rating. Since September 2001, Bush's approval trajectory fell in an almost steady rate of decline throughout the rest of his Administration. America's faith in the

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<sup>647</sup> "Bush and Public Opinion: Reviewing the Bush Years and the Public's Final Verdict," Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, December 18, 2008, at <http://www.people-press.org/2008/12/18/bush-and-public-opinion/> (accessed 6 February 2014): 5; *Ibid*, 2; *Ibid*, 3; *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>648</sup> In 2002 a strong plurality of Americans stated in the Pew polling data that the best way to reduce terrorism was to boost American military involvement abroad but by 2008 a strong plurality had reversed this position and indicated that reducing Americans military presence overseas would most likely reduce the threat of attacks. *Ibid*, 18.

most recent incarnation of the Frontier Myth structure would take a beating as well: eventually compelling its remaining conservative adherents to fall back on the memory of their old Cowboy President standby: Ronald Reagan.<sup>649</sup>

### **The 2008 Presidential Campaign and the Return of the Republican Frontier “Mavericks”**

Even with the host of substantial setbacks for Cowboy Bush, more attempts arose to revive Frontier imagery in the service of Republican presidential hopefuls in the 2008 election campaign. The conservative tropes of the post-Reagan era attempted to situate the Republican 2008 candidates for the presidency in the company of legendary pioneers and America’s most powerful long-standing myth. The chosen Republican presidential candidate, Senator John McCain of Arizona, was not so much taken with the cowboy trappings of his predecessors. Instead, McCain had compelling hero credentials of his own: as a POW in Vietnam he spent years living out his gruesome captivity narrative for six years at the “Hanoi Hilton” (refusing along the way, an out of sequence early repatriation offer). A self-described “maverick,” McCain’s persona fit well with the image of the loner seeking to bring justice to a troubled world. The candidate frequently likened himself to the first Frontier President, Theodore Roosevelt. And he drew on Ronald Reagan’s habit of invoking John Winthrop’s statement that Americans were “as a City upon a Hill” to emphasize America’s exceptionalism and greatness. Cowboy Bush was almost never mentioned. As his sidekick, McCain chose Governor Sarah Palin of Alaska—the state often portrayed as America’s residual

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<sup>649</sup> Presidential Job Approval, George W. Bush, February 1, 2001 to January 11, 2009. Data adapted from the Gallup Poll and compiled by Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* (accessed 13 July 2011).

frontier—as Maverick number two on his team. Palin was allegedly a cowgirl mother who could “field dress” a Moose. Camille Page claimed: “The gun-toting Sarah Palin is like Annie Oakley...a brash ambassador from America’s pioneer past.”<sup>650</sup> Another ecstatic, conservative observer called her “a Western version of Margaret Thatcher.”<sup>650</sup> The 2008 election demonstrated that the Frontier Myth remained resilient among many conservatives even if it had soured among those of other political stripes.



**Figure 11.1: McCain and Palin as “The New Mavericks” of the 2008 Presidential Campaign.**  
(From author’s collection)

Throughout the 2008 campaign, big business and conservative pundits relentlessly attacked proponents of restrictions on carbon emissions—describing climate change as a fake phenomenon that prevented Americans from exploiting their “frontier bonanza” of economic growth and unrestricted consumption. McCain dutifully played along with

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<sup>650</sup> Quotations appear in John Tirman, “The Future of the American Frontier: Can one of our most enduring myths, much in evidence in the recent presidential campaign, be reinvented again?” *American Scholar*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (Winter 2009): 33.

their assertions to a point. But some on the right of the presidential candidate quickly wanted to put the kibosh on McCain's own allegedly hypocritical claims that he was a Republican "in the Theodore Roosevelt mold." The suspicious Michael Knox Beran of the *National Review* complained adamantly about McCain's self-comparisons to TR:

It's one thing for a conservative to admire T. R.'s style and gallantry, the charge up San Juan Hill, the rounding up of crooks in the Badlands. It's something else for a conservative to identify Roosevelt as a fellow reformer, as Sen. McCain did....Far from allaying conservative fears of a man who, largely for reasons of expediency, embraced a host of dubious reforms, and who ended his career by embracing the Progressive dream of a state strong enough to command the industry and commerce of a nation....All in all John McCain would do better to talk more about Ronald Reagan and less about Theodore Roosevelt.<sup>651</sup>

Liberal critic Dan Santina had his own take on both Reagan and Bush 43 versus TR in his online piece, "Ride-em Brush Cutter". Santina too was offended by Republicans' comparisons of the recent Republican Frontier Presidents to TR but for the opposite reasons of the *National Review*. "In domestic policy, the latter day Republican presidents are as different from TR as day from night.... Cowboy imagery helped all three get elected president, but maybe Roosevelt's years in the saddle with working class cowboys gave him an insight into the human condition that would forever escape the fake cowboy presidents.... Aw Shucks Reagan and Smoke 'Em Out Bush are laughingly embarrassing when faced with the real McCoy. At least, for a while, Theodore Roosevelt walked the walk."<sup>652</sup> The liberal TR—and the version of the Frontier Myth he espoused—is out of favour in the twenty-first century GOP; but so too is the bungled Bush

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<sup>651</sup> Michael Knox Beran, "McCain's Cult of Teddy Roosevelt: The Sage of Sagamore Hill was Not a Conservative," *National Review Online* (July 16, 2008), <http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/225038/mccains-cult-teddy-roosevelt/michael-knox-beran/page/0/1> (accessed 7 May 2014).

<sup>652</sup> Santina, "Cowboy Imagery and the American Presidency."

association with the myth. Instead a more conservative than Reagan version of Reagan has been ushered into service. All of which is demonstrative of the recent changes brought by the event/structure relationship to the Frontier Myth.

### **Cowboy Reagan as *The Republican Icon***

The popular image of Ronald Reagan has improved with time. During the late Bush Sr. and much of the Clinton years, Reagan was rated as an average president by the American public.<sup>653</sup> Though still unpopular with many Democrats and Independents, as early as the 2004 campaign, Reagan had become the Republican gold standard for presidents and presidential candidates: a legacy tied inseparably with the conservative Frontier Myth.

On June 14, 2004, just after Ronald Reagan's death at the age of 93, *Time*, *Newsweek* and *People* magazines made an extremely unusual decision: they all independently decided to run the exact same close-up photo of Cowboy Reagan in his white Stetson and denim shirt on their front covers (and the very same image used in the *America: Reagan Country* campaign). For Republicans, Reagan and Frontier Conservatism went together like Roy Rogers and Trigger. In 2009, while touring the "Hall of Great Westerners" at the huge National Cowboy Hall of Fame and Western Heritage Center in Oklahoma City, I encountered a larger than life Cowboy Reagan statute entitled "After the Ride". Two years later I bumped into an identical statue at the entrance to the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California. Inside the building in the official Reagan Presidential Museum, meanwhile, an entire display of

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<sup>653</sup> Nancy Benac, "Reagan, Bush, Clinton Rated So-So," *Ventura County Star*, February 9, 1997: A15, in Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Newspaper Reference Files, "Reagan, Ronald W. – Historical Analysis" file.



Stetsons, spurs and gun belts is dedicated to Reagan as “the traditional Man of the West” standing tall and victorious from his savage war against Soviet Communism abroad and big government at home. In 2012, I had another brush with a somewhat lower budget Reagan statue, once again in his most famous incarnation at the entrance to Scheels All Sports sporting goods and gun store in Bismarck, North Dakota. This time the Republican’s #1 Cowboy hero, wearing similar attire to “After the Ride” (minus the jacket) had his foot up on a bench in a “sit by me” stance. The accompanying plaque at the entrance to the massive store proudly displayed the self-reliant Reagan quotations: “Government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem,” and “The most terrifying words in the English language are ‘I am from the government and I am here to help.’” For conservatives, Reagan has become part of the nation’s glorification of the mythic West (just as has the Cowboy Hall of Fame’s original eighteen-foot-high plaster cast of James Earl Fraser’s 1896 sculpture, *The End of the Trail*, is the most famous of all the images of the Vanishing American). For many Americans, Reagan, conservatism and the Frontier Myth have become virtually synonymous.



**Figure 11.2: After The Ride statute appearing at the entrance to the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California. A duplicate resides at the National Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City. (Photograph by the author, 2011)**

By 2011, the year that would have marked Reagan's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, his iconic popularity had reached a fever pitch. Just prior to Presidents Day 2011, more Americans now rated Ronald Reagan as the country's greatest president—greater than any other. In the *Austin American-Statesman's* special "Centennial Tribute to Reagan's Influence," the editor exclaimed that: "Ronald Reagan would have turned 100 this Sunday, and nearly seven years after his death, one might think he is still alive and leading the Republican Party....Reagan's near-idol status in the GOP is so ingrained that when potential party chairmen were asked last month to name their political hero, the

moderator hastened to add ‘aside from President Reagan.’” Potential GOP presidential candidate and former House Speaker Newt Gingrich gushed on the centenary that Reagan was “extraordinarily quotable and inspiring, as much as Lincoln and more than anyone else in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.” As observed in earlier chapters, Reagan’s presidency followed the Vietnam experience, assassinations, OPEC Crisis, Watergate, Stagflation and humiliation in the Middle East. Americans wanted to believe in themselves and in a revised version of the Frontier Myth which had allegedly made their country both great and exceptional. Former Clinton aide Paul Begala was less glowing on the revitalization of the former Republican president: “Reagan holds unique status today because the Republicans don’t have anyone else,” Begala contended. “They can’t lionize Eisenhower because, by today’s standards, he was a liberal. They can’t lionize Nixon because he was a criminal. Who have they got left? He was an extraordinary president but the right needed a hero, so they turned him into a hero.” The right needed a hero, but it was Reagan’s spin on the Frontier Myth which provided the structures upon which a hero could be made. Now, as another observer notes, it has been 30 years and Republicans are searching for another Reagan but no one has yet filled the his shoes.<sup>654</sup>

### **After Bush: The Far Right Frontier**

“Remember George W. Bush?” asked Howard Kurtz of *Newsweek* in his 2012 editorial, “Ditching Dubya.” “It doesn’t seem all that long ago that he was the revered leader of the Republican Party: a paragon of courage....But now GOP candidates seem to be running against him almost as aggressively as they’re running against his Democratic

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<sup>654</sup> Polling data from Frank Newport, “Americans Say Reagan Is the Greatest President,” Gallup, February 18, 2011 <http://www.gallup.com/poll/146183/Americans-Say-Reagan-Greatest-Presding.aspx> (accessed 11 May 2011); All quotations appear in Jennifer Medina, “Centennial a Tribute to Reagan’s Influence,” *Austin American-Statesman*, February 4, 2011: A2-A3, in LBJ Library, Reference Files Collection—Reagan, Ronald.

successor.” Kurtz went on to point out that all the frontrunners for the GOP presidential candidate nomination in 2012—Mitt Romney, Rick Perry and Newt Gingrich—were doing whatever they could to put as much distance between themselves and Bush as possible.<sup>655</sup> Ashley Parker of the *New York Times* wondered if Governor Rick Perry’s chances of becoming the next President might be hurt by his surface similarities with Bush: including the swagger, the cowboy boots “and a down home way of speakin’ that’s heavy on the dropped g’s” (as in “over-taxin’, over-regulatin’ and ‘over-litigatin’”). As Perry attempted to win the loyalty of those on the far right, his supporters reportedly got the news out that their candidate “represents a more authentic version of the down-home Texan Mr. Bush only claimed to be”—ironically, taking a page out of Bush’s own playbook from the days he ran for Governor of Texas.<sup>656</sup> For those on the right of the Republican Party, including a larger proportion of rural voters, the Frontier Myth was viewed as having become their “property” under Reagan, not Bush—and in the 2000s when Reagan’s own positions seemed too conciliatory, both Reagan’s image and the myth underwent a shift even further on the right of the political spectrum. In recent years, ultra-conservatives have heavily invoked the myth’s ideals of individualism and self-reliance and the like and attached these to Reagan as the symbol of a clearly partisan myth. The Spring 2011 issue of *Libertas*, the quarterly publication of the right wing Young America’s Foundation, features Sarah Palin on horseback at the Reagan Ranch (an image made into posters as well). Inside the former Alaska Governor gushes over the Ranch as “unmistakably the home of a western conservative who celebrated our

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<sup>655</sup> Howard Kurtz, “Ditching Dubya: The Top GOP Candidates Were Bush-Backers—and Are Running From His Legacy as Fast as They Can,” *Newsweek* (March 19, 2012): 25.

<sup>656</sup> Ashley Parker, “Twang and Job Title Might Be the Same, but Perry and Bush Keep Their Distance,” *New York Times* (August 20, 2011): A11.

pioneering spirit.”<sup>657</sup> Dick Cheney and conservative polemicist Ann Coulter also figure prominently in the issue as they celebrate the Reagan centenary but the issue featured no signs of more moderate Republicans such as John McCain. Less than subtle features of the young conservatives’ magazine included several large images of Reagan in cowboy attire along with a series of posters and books directed at the Democratic President, Barack Obama. Among the slogans, intended to be unflattering, that appeared alongside grim images of the Democratic President were: “Barack Obama: Epic Fail,” and “Resist! The Tyranny of Socialism.” The issue also featured an interview with Jason Mattera, author of *Obama Zombies: How the Liberal Machine Brainwashed My Generation*.<sup>658</sup>

In what *Newsweek* labelled “a right-wing panderfest” the political culture post-Bush had become even grimmer and more extreme after Dubya had departed: giving rise to a Tea Party that had shaken the establishment of the Republican Party and instilled a sentiment in American politics where “Cooperation became a dirty word.” The Frontier Myth’s recent manifestations are almost exclusively employed by those on the right of the political spectrum as Reagan himself is appropriated by these conservative ideologues as being more to the right than Reagan ever was.<sup>659</sup>

Since Bush left office in 2008, collectivist readings of the American Constitution by Democrats have collided increasingly with the individualist readings of those on the right: with the “Obamacare” healthcare program, the environment, gay rights, gun control, Social Security, enduring troubles in the Middle East, and a series of economic crises seemingly driving the wedge even further between two camps who understand

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<sup>657</sup> Kate Obenshain, “Governor Sarah Palin and Vice President Dick Cheney Headline Reagan 100 Birthday Celebration,” *Libertas*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Spring 2011): 18-19.

<sup>658</sup> Katie Taran, “An Interview with Jason Mattera,” *Libertas*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Spring 2011): 22-23.

<sup>659</sup> Kurtz, “Ditching Dubya,” 25.

their country's history and values differently.<sup>660</sup> As has always been the case, events and forces often beyond control of the presidents themselves have largely shaped the legacy of their Administrations and of the Frontier Myth—that four of them explored in this study relied upon so heavily.

### **A Century After TR: The Frontier Myth in Reverse**

Just as Republicans have been moving away from Theodore Roosevelt's liberal brand of the Frontier Myth as an icon/guide for their Party and ideology, the current President Barack Obama has invoked it on numerous occasions to promote both TR's liberalism and the protection of the weak in society from the corruptions of corporate power. Perhaps the occasion which received the most attention was Obama's speech in Osawatimie, Kansas (the "home" of TR's New Nationalism) where Obama told his audience in 2011 that: "[Theodore] Roosevelt believed then what we know is true today, that the free market is the greatest force for progress in human history....But Roosevelt also knew that the free market has never been a free license to take whatever you can from whomever you can." Obama then quoted from the first Progressive President: "'Our country," [TR] said, "...means nothing unless it means the triumph of a real democracy...of an economic system under which each man shall be guaranteed the opportunity to show the best that there is in him.'" Press reaction to the speech on both sides of the political spectrum was immediate and polarized. The *New Jersey Star-Ledger* offered up the view of many of Obama's supporters: according to the *Star-Ledger's* editor, the current Republican Party's "worship of the free market, its aversion

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<sup>660</sup> Timothy Stanley, historian at Oxford University, quoted in "Obama's Ringing Defense of Liberalism," *CNN News*, January 21, 2013 (accessed online 6 May 2014).

to using an active government to remedy its excesses, would drive Roosevelt into the arms of the Democrat Party if he were alive today.” Some Republicans still winced at such descriptions but others returned to their attacks on TR himself: a reflection of how much the political nature of the Frontier Myth has changed over the past century.<sup>661</sup>

Obama has never wrapped himself in the mantle of the Frontier Myth—as Roosevelt, Johnson, Reagan and Bush did—but like most Presidents since TR he has not completely avoided its use either. In his remarks at Springfield, Illinois in 2009, Obama praised Abraham Lincoln’s understanding that “personal liberty and self-reliance, that fierce independence” were at the heart of the American frontier experience. “But he also understood something else,” Obama reminded his audience. “He recognized that while each of us must do our part...there are certain things we cannot do on our own. There are certain things we can all do together.” Many of the “certain things” were then described in terms related to the President’s plans for the nation.<sup>662</sup> In other speeches, Obama has briefly invoked the myth in his references to wilderness preservation, the pursuit of modern frontiers in science and technology, and hope for the future.<sup>663</sup> But

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<sup>661</sup> “President Obama Aptly Invokes Teddy Roosevelt in Kansas Speech,” *New Jersey Star-Ledger*, December 8, 2011, online at [http://blog.nj.com/njv\\_editorial\\_page/2011/12/president\\_obama\\_fittingly\\_invo/1921/comments-2.html](http://blog.nj.com/njv_editorial_page/2011/12/president_obama_fittingly_invo/1921/comments-2.html) (accessed 29 March 2012); Among those most critical of Obama’s speech see: Douglas Holtz-Eakon, “Obama’s Hypocritical, Incoherent and Unpresidential Economic Speech,” *Fox News.com*, December 8, 2011, online at <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2011/12/08/obamas-hypocritical-incoherent-and-unpresidential-economic-speech/> (accessed 3 July 2014); “Text: Obama Address on the Economy in Kansas,” *CBS News*, (December 6, 2011), online at <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/text-obama-address-on-the-economy-in-kansas/> (accessed 3 July 2014).

<sup>662</sup> Barack Obama: “Remarks at the Abraham Lincoln Association Annual Banquet in Springfield, Illinois,” February 12, 2009. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=85778>. (accessed 2 July, 2014)

<sup>663</sup> See Barack Obama: “Proclamation 8409 - National Wilderness Month, 2009,” September 3, 2009. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=86586> (accessed 2 July, 2014); Barack Obama: “Proclamation 8437 - Columbus Day, 2009,” October 9, 2009. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=86750> (accessed 2 July 2014); Barack Obama: “Remarks on America’s Great Outdoors Initiative,” February 16, 2011. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*.

while Obama has engaged the Frontier symbolism on occasion—putting it to some of the same uses that TR and LBJ did previously—these have only been passing references. Barack Obama’s lack of inclination to invoke the Frontier Myth in a substantive way is not surprising in an era when the myth has become the appropriated property of the Republican Party.

In his Second Inaugural Address, exactly 32 years after Ronald Reagan had launched an era of anti-government politics with his first inaugural address, Obama offered a comprehensive rebuttal that Conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer conceded “marked the end of Reaganism.”<sup>664</sup> Picking up on similar themes to TR and LBJ—but in Obama’s case void of references to Western imagery—the Democratic President insisted that what happens across town affected you and your neighbours and he called upon Americans to realize that they cannot have liberty for all without justice for all. Contrary to conservatives’ idea that government and liberty were always at odds, Obama insisted that in reality they complemented each other. “Individual freedom,” he proclaimed, was “heightened best when balanced with community security.” Taking a line almost right out of LBJ’s 1964 Democratic Party Platform, he then declared that “Preserving our individual freedoms ultimately requires collective action.” And instead of government being the problem, the President reminded viewers that anyone could fall victim to sudden misfortune and that it took both individual responsibility and the role of community to give each child an opportunity to succeed. While Reaganites and their ancestors had chided a nation of “Welfare Queens” and “takers,” Obama contended that

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<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=88999> (accessed 2 July 2014); Barack Obama: “Remarks at a Campaign Rally in Cleveland, Ohio,” October 25, 2012. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=102562> (accessed 2 July 2014).

<sup>664</sup> Charles Krauthammer quoted in Van Jones, “Obama Speech: Anti-Government Era is Over,” *CNN News*, January 23, 2013 (accessed online 23 January 2013).



Medicaid, Medicare and Social Security “free us to take the risks that make this country great.” Inclusiveness was part of the first African-American President’s message too: diversity, equal rights, fair pay, and maintaining a safety net for the poor and disabled—all were what had made the American Dream possible for each new generation.<sup>665</sup> As historian Brian Balogh of the University of Virginia declared after the address: “He stated the ‘c’ word—collective—loudly and proudly.” By invoking this collective action explicitly, Obama tapped into a century-old progressive agenda launched by TR to the nation’s founding documents and to its past history. But, notably, Obama did so again without the persuasive powers of the Frontier Myth which both TR and LBJ had used so persuasively.<sup>666</sup>

Unfortunately for Obama, he has been somewhat less successful in this era of political brinkmanship than TR was in his day when the latter urged Americans to have empathy with people, including cowboys, from other walks of life and to transcend mutual interests in favour of the mutual good. Still, if the results of the 2012 presidential race are any indication, Obama received less of the blame from the electorate than did the growing perception of congressional dysfunction. The current state of the Frontier Myth is caught in a kind of conservative limbo as it was for liberals during another postwar period of economic uncertainty: the late 1960s and 1970s. Given its previous resilience, one can certainly envision that the Myth might be called upon again in a major way by presidential contenders of the future: the shape of which to be determined at least as much by events and forces beyond the Presidents’ control, as by those who

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<sup>665</sup> Barack Obama: “Inaugural Address,” January 21, 2013. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=102827> (accessed 2 July 2014).

<sup>666</sup> Brian Balogh quoted in “Obama’s Ringing Defense of Liberalism,” *CNN News*, January 21, 2013 (accessed online 6 May 2014).

would deploy the symbolism and power of the myth themselves. And though the presidents and presidential candidate protagonists of the myth have been conservatives since Reagan, there is no reason why major events such as the Iraq War and Hurricane Katrina, along with changing circumstances, could not cause a shift back to some of the original liberal uses of the Frontier Myth that began with Theodore Roosevelt.

## **Conclusion**

President Lyndon Johnson's frontier myth was too shaken by the events of Vietnam for him to seek re-election. President Bush's conservative frontier mythology saw his popularity eventually drop even lower levels in 2008 than Johnson's depths in 1968. By the time Bush 43 left office in 2009, the conservative movement that he had led was in a mess. The war in Iraq had become yet another painful quagmire; Afghanistan, meanwhile, had become a low-intensity slog against the al-Qaeda backed Taliban which had seemingly only deepened its resolve as it spread into Pakistan. General Westmoreland had promised Americans that the war in Vietnam would be over by Christmas 1965. Emphasizing fiscal matters, VP Cheney had once similarly said that the Iraq conflict would cost Americans next to nothing. They were both wrong.

Previously, many scholars, journalists and diplomats have situated the Iraq War largely in the context of a conflict that was based in and predicated upon a fabricated lie. For LBJ his Great Society at home was eclipsed by the fabricated Gulf of Tonkin incident. For Bush, his Administration's false claims of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq has been perceived as leading to long term disaster in the Middle East.<sup>667</sup> Some

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<sup>667</sup> Three (of numerous) examples include the influential article by: the former charge d'affaires in Baghdad, Joseph C. Wilson, "What I Didn't Find in Africa," *New York Times*, July 6, 2003, online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/06/opinion/what-i-didn-t-find-in-africa.html> (accessed 9 October

analysts, especially on the left, have emphasized the corporate interests that America held toward a region rich in oil reserves.<sup>668</sup> Though these points are in many respects accurate and insightful, what these discussions fail to do is to provide answers to the question: How did Bush so successfully promote a war based on bad intelligence and false information about weapons of mass destruction and where corporate interests were so blatantly visible? The answer, as I hope I have demonstrated, lies largely in the ability of presidents to engage and deploy powerful frontier mythology. This mythology, however, is not ahistorical (as Turnerian scholars such as Ray Allen Billington and leftist liberals such as Patricia Limerick might lead one to think). Rather, the myth shifts and adapts in the face of powerful historical events. For LBJ it was Vietnam and upheaval at home, for Carter, the economy and the seeming impotence and upheaval at home in the face of crisis in Iran. This created a hinge that shifted the Frontier Myth from one that was broad and capable of explaining the lived history and potential future of a broad range of Americans into a narrow and conservative one that disenfranchised black, Hispanic, gay, and liberal cowboys. But in an ironic twist of fate, the events of Iraq and Iran and Hurricane Katrina shook the foundations of the conservative frontier structures and have created, it seems, an opportunity for Obama or, more likely, future Democrats to reclaim the domestic frontier mythology of TR.

Americans had paid a terrible cost in lives and treasure in Iraq. At first, as with LBJ, the American media and public had mostly supported President Bush's venture

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2015); editorialist Paul Krugman, "Errors and Lies," *New York Times*, May 15, 2015, online at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/18/opinion/paul-krugman-errors-and-lies.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/18/opinion/paul-krugman-errors-and-lies.html?_r=0) (accessed 9 October 2015); and scholar Douglas Kellner, "Bushspeak and the Politics of Lying: Presidential Rhetoric in the 'War on Terror'," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (December 2007): 622-643.

<sup>668</sup> Nana J. Jhaveri, "Petroimperialism: US Oil Interests and the Iraq War," *Antipode*, Vol. 36, Issue 1 (January 2004): 2-10; Philippe Le Billon and Favad El Khativ, "From Free Oil to 'Freedom Oil': Terrorism, War and US Geopolitics in the Persian Gulf," *Geopolitics*, Vol. 9, Issue 1 (2004): 109-137.

overseas; but as Bush's credibility gap widened, the press and public turned against him just as it had against Johnson. The day after LBJ announced his decision not to run for re-election in 1968, he told the National Association of Broadcasters in Chicago that the media is highly selective in the stories it pursues. The media and especially TV, Johnson contended, prefers the spectacle of war in the stories it pursues to the less visually compelling quest for peace. "Peace, in the news sense, is a 'condition.' War is an 'event.'" The "event" LBJ had described, which helped destroy the liberal version of the Frontier Myth is a potential threat to the conservative version too.<sup>669</sup>

Marshall Sahlins challenges scholars to look not only at how events impact on structure—in this case the structure of the Frontier Myth—but how structure shapes events. Both inform one another. George W. Bush attempted to deploy Western symbolism in the aftermath of 9/11, most significantly through his invasion of Iraq: a country which today remains bitterly divided and gripped by civil war as a direct result of Bush's actions more than a decade ago.<sup>670</sup> Bush, like Reagan, wanted to restore "the good old days" through what he perceived as a return to simpler times of frontier justice that he had learned about largely from popular culture. But when Bush's responses to 9/11 and a failing economy proved inadequate to deal with the complex realities of the world in the twenty-first century, it became obvious to the majority of Americans that the kind of frontier symbolism and ethics he promoted did not match the historic experience. Bush's empty boasts of "mission accomplished" in Iraq caused the optimism of the can-do Frontier Myth to once again be called seriously into question just as it had been for the liberal LBJ four decades before. The limits of American power have again

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<sup>669</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson: "Remarks in Chicago Before the National Association of Broadcasters," April 1, 1968. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=28774> (accessed 2 July 2014).

<sup>670</sup> See Michael Crowley, "Iraq's Eternal War," *Time*, Vol. 183, No. 25 (June 30, 2014): 28-34.

become glaringly evident and the nation's sense of mission, or at least its ability to carry this out, viewed with increasing doubt. Domestically, the Bush Republicans insistence on rugged individualism through de-regulation, a free-for-all "bonanza" economy, and "get-the-government-off-our-backs" tax cuts has also been viewed with an increasingly skeptical eye as it appeared to Americans that it was these very policies that caused the collapse of the nation's powerful economic system in 2008.

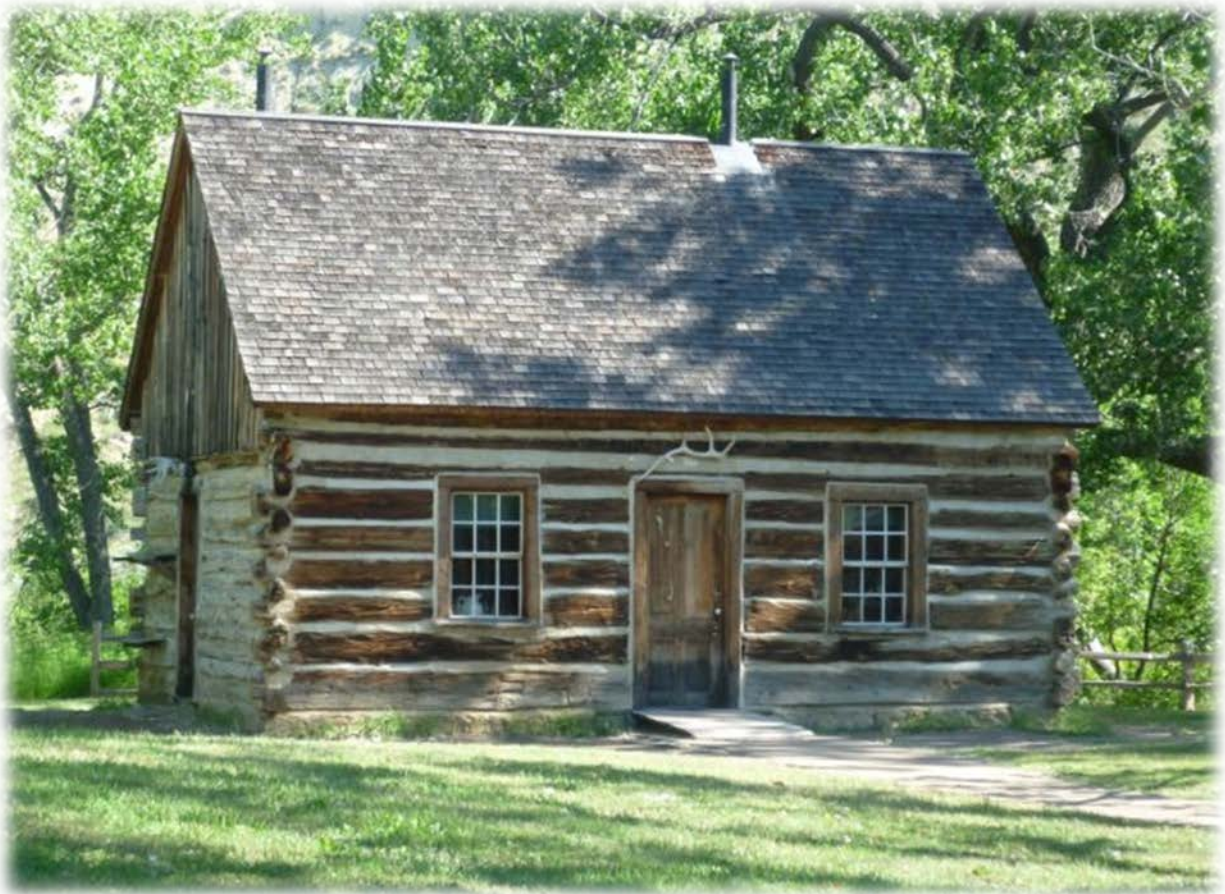
As we have observed since the early twentieth century, major events in United States and world history have caused the emphasis of the Frontier Myth to be changed to varying degrees; simultaneously, presidents could attempt to marshal this symbolism in support of their wide-ranging ideologies and backgrounds. Theodore Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan appear to have had more success in these areas than did the tragic presidencies of Lyndon B. Johnson and George W. Bush. For all four Presidents, though, the myth had a discursive power that both constrained and liberated actions by creating expectations among the American public of what Frontier America should do and what it could do. Events and decisions that rendered earlier expressions of the myth less viable for Democrats in the late 1960s and 1970s would have a very similar impact on George W. Bush in the 2000s. Today it is Republicans, not Democrats, who are still much more prone to apply the Frontier Myth and to try to do so in the context of their one relatively recent presidential icon, Ronald Reagan, rather than through the much more maligned Bush. But the Republicans success in using this imagery appears to have been rendered largely impotent outside of the most "red" of states. Johnson and Bush's own discourse and policy were partly responsible for the myth's ultimate inability to provide solutions to both of them, but in a broader sense their downfall and the two

periods of decline in the myth's power have been a result of broader, changing historical events and circumstances as well.

## Conclusion

*The word frontier is not about to go away, for it will always hold a privileged place in the American cultural lexicon.*

--John Mack Faragher, *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner* (1994)<sup>671</sup>



**Figure C.1:** TR's Maltese Cross Ranch Cabin in its final resting place near the entrance to Theodore Roosevelt National Park, Medora, North Dakota. (Photograph by the author, 2011)

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<sup>671</sup> Faragher, *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner*, 241.

## The Presidential Ranches

All four frontier presidents who are the focus of this study owned ranches that became an integral component of their own cowboy personas and served as a symbolic setting for policy promotion and diplomacy. Significantly, the long term fates of these Western White Houses mostly reflect the dominant Frontier Myths of each president's time in office. For conservationist presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson, the National Park Service would play a key role in the future of their frontier spreads. For the conservative ideologue Ronald Reagan, *Rancho del Cielo* was destined for profit and promotion of the GOP. George W. Bush's ranch, meanwhile, remains an ironic work in progress.

Theodore Roosevelt's Maltese Cross Ranch Cabin in southwestern North Dakota went on "tour" during his years in the White House—going on the road to the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis, the Clark Exposition in Portland the following year, then to Fargo and the North Dakota State Capital Grounds in Bismarck in 1908. Over that four year period the Cabin was viewed by more than two million people—including Roosevelt's children and TR himself.<sup>672</sup> Since 1959 the then fully restored cabin has been located near the Visitors' Centre at the Theodore Roosevelt National Park near Medora, North Dakota. According to the park rangers and park literature, it is furnished to look exactly as it did when TR lived in it 130 years ago.

Not all has gone as planned for the park preservationists, though. On June 6, 2010, TR's Elkhorn ranch next to the Little Missouri was designated one of America's most endangered historic places by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The ranch is

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<sup>672</sup> Mike Thompson, *The Travels and Tribulations of Theodore Roosevelt's Cabin* (San Angelo, TX: Laughing Horse Enterprises, 2004): 38.



in peril due in large part to the North Dakota oil boom and its nearby use of hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, just outside the borders of the Theodore Roosevelt National Park. TR's great-grandson, Tween Roosevelt, states that: "TR fought those who would ravage our national resources for the benefit of a few. Now it is time to fight to save his ranch from the same type of selfish people today who would destroy it for their personal gain."<sup>673</sup> Former North Dakota tourism director Jim Fuglie has also spoken out publicly about threats to the park, telling the *Los Angeles Times* in late 2013 that: "We have pristine air, we have pristine water; nothing has ever threatened these things before." Today, however, "the park has become an island in the sea of development."<sup>674</sup> That these kinds of battles over lands protection and commercial development are occurring over Roosevelt's ranch testifies to the fact that many of the same issues he dealt with in his day remain just as controversial today. At the time of writing, if anything might save the Roosevelt ranch lands and park from further degradation it may be the sudden drop in oil prices in the Fall of 2014 which has shut down just over half of the state's drilling rigs.<sup>675</sup>

More than 1,000 miles to the South of TR's Elkhorn, the LBJ Ranch in Stonewall, Texas, was considered by President Johnson himself as an integral part of his own frontier image which he continued nurturing after having left office in 1969. That LBJ

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<sup>673</sup> Tween Roosevelt quoted in "National Trust for Historic Preservation Names North Dakota's Elkhorn Ranch Among America's Most Endangered Historic Places," *Boone and Crockett Club* [website], June 6, 2012, accessed at [http://www.boone-crockett.org/news/featured\\_story.asp?area=news&ID=140](http://www.boone-crockett.org/news/featured_story.asp?area=news&ID=140) (accessed 3 July 2012).

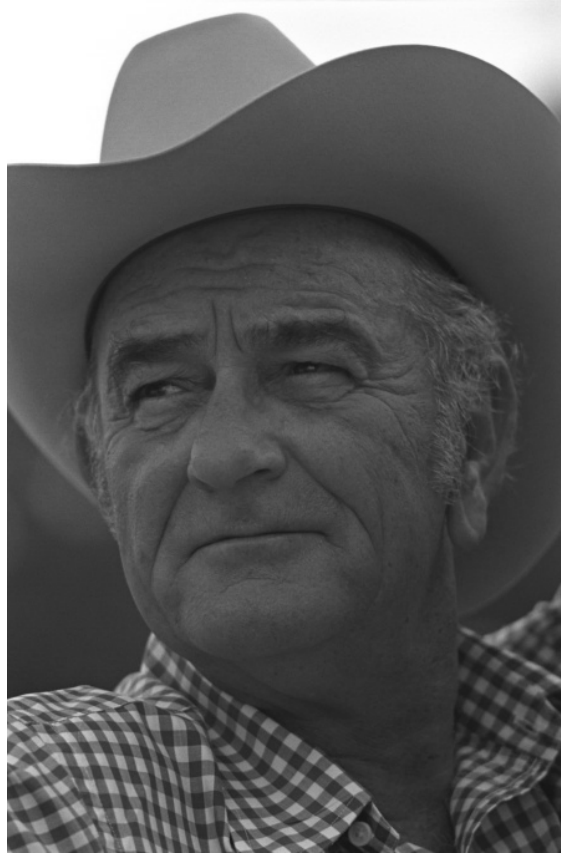
<sup>674</sup> Becca Clemens, "North Dakota Oil Boom Brings Worry to Theodore Roosevelt National Park," *Los Angeles Times* (2 November 2013), online at < <http://articles.latimes.com/print/2013/nov/02/nation/la-na-roosevelt-dakota-20131103> > (accessed 3 December 2015).

<sup>675</sup> Mara Van Ells, "A North Dakota Oil Boom Goes Bust," *The Atlantic* (June 27 2015), online at: < <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/06/north-dakota-oil-boom-bust/396620/> > (accessed 4 December 2015).

was so taken by his cowboy, man of the soil self-image, is evident from the story behind the photograph below (Figure C.2)—which is filed at the LBJ Library under the heading, “John Wayne photo.” Remarkably, it was not until 500,000 photographs were taken of the President by White House photographers over the course of a decade that Johnson finally got the exact image of himself he had been longing for: shot while in retirement, fittingly, at the LBJ Ranch. Frank Wolfe, the photographer who captured it, explained what LBJ liked about the image: “the cowboy, hat and shirt gave an ‘earthy look,’ making him appear ‘tall and robust.’ It is the image of a man who comes from the land—tough, grizzled, dependable, not given to boasting—the heroic figure John Wayne played in so many Hollywood productions.”<sup>676</sup> As for the Ranch itself, park service champions Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson aptly gifted their own Texas White House ranch and its

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<sup>676</sup> David Culbert, “Presidential Images,” *The Wilson Quarterly*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (New Year’s 1983): 164, 166, 167.



**Figure C.2: The post-presidential “John Wayne” photo taken in September 18, 1972, just four months before Johnson’s death. (Courtesy of the LBJ Library, Photo No. D4717-23A.)**

buildings to the Federal Government in 1972 to become a National Historic Park. Like the LBJ Library and Museum, the Historic Park is unusual for its free admission charge arranged through LBJ’s own estate so that all Americans (or, at least, those who travel there) might have equal access. Most of the rooms in the ranch house have been restored to look exactly as they did during Johnson’s presidential years. Along with the house, the LBJ Ranch grounds include a large number roaming cattle, Johnson’s birthplace, the family cemetery, and numerous frontier-theme and conservation exhibits.

The fate of *Rancho del Cielo* after conservative Ronald Reagan left the White House in 1989 differs markedly from the TR and LBJ ranches but it too is tied closely to this President's policy-making legacy. A few weeks after Ronald Reagan was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 1996, the Ranch went up for sale at an asking price of \$5.95 million. There were no takers. The following year California's Republican Governor Pete Wilson and Republican Congressman Ralph Regula, chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee, put forward a plan to spend \$5 million from the federal budget to purchase the ranch from the Reagans and turn it into a state park. While Ronald and Nancy supported the idea of the state park for the ranch many locals did not, objecting to the idea of using taxpayer money to purchase and maintain the ranch. Soon protests were organized.<sup>677</sup> Editorialist John Krist of the *Ventura County Star* summed up the essence of the locals' concerns in his column:

It is almost comically ironic to think that federal parkland money might be spent on the Reagan ranch. While he was president, Reagan savaged the national park acquisition budget, virtually zeroing out expenditures from the Land and Water Conservation Fund because he was ideologically opposed to expanding the federal park system....Reagan may have been the greatest enemy of federal park expansion to occupy the White House in this century. From a historical perspective, it is little short of absurd to propose buying his ranch with the money he so doggedly refused to spend on behalf of the American people.<sup>678</sup>

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<sup>677</sup> Robert Jablon, "Protest Thwarts Taxpayers' Purchase of Reagan Ranch," *Ventura County Star*, October 4, 1997: A1, A6, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Newspaper Reference File, "Reagan, Ronald W.—Rancho del Cielo."

<sup>678</sup> Nancy Trejos, "Group to Buy Reagan's California Ranch," *Los Angeles Times*, April 20, 1998, in *Ibid*; John Krist, "Reagan Wouldn't Approve: Ranch—As President He Fought the Kind of Land Deal His Fans Now Propose," *Ventura County Star*, October 30, 1997 in *Ibid*. As Krist's title would indicate, he was unaware that the Reagans actually liked the idea of selling *Rancho del Cielo* to the government so that it could be made a state park.

More in sync with their own philosophy, the Reagans eventually sold *Rancho del Cielo* in 1998 to the Young America's Foundation (YAF) which promotes conservative values among college and high school students.<sup>679</sup>

Today the YAF's director and his wife refer to the Reagan Ranch as "hallowed ground" and use the ranch for leadership conferences to steep young Americans in "Reaganism."<sup>680</sup> As with the LBJ Ranch, everything at the *Rancho del Cielo* today is placed exactly where it had been when Ronald and Nancy Reagan lived there during his presidency. Along with Reagan's choice of Western novels on the bookshelf are rugged Western paintings on the walls, a shotgun resting on antlers over the doorway, Reagan's riding boots in the closet, a large collection of cowboy hats and belt buckles, a spur once carried into space, and a blue and gold cavalry horse blanket hanging on the wall. Adriene Davis, a spokesperson for the foundation, describes the motive behind the purchase of the ranch: "There's a tremendous hunger in the Republican Party and the conservative movement for a Reagan-like leader."<sup>681</sup> In promotional material for the YAF's recently released movie, *Still Point in a Turning World: Ronald Reagan and his Ranch*, we find some clues as to what kind of leader this would be. We are told that *Rancho del Cielo* remains "a living embodiment of the timeless values he [Reagan] held dear. The Ranch was where hard work and self-reliance showed themselves in principles he championed for all Americans: Freedom, Prosperity, and Victory."<sup>682</sup> The title of this 2011 film would also appear indicative of the Republican Party's ongoing promotion of

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<sup>679</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>680</sup> YAF Director quoted in Jeff Wilson, "Reagan Ranch Becomes a Conservative Shrine," *Austin American-Statesman*, November 22, 1998: A36, in LBJ Library, Reference Files Collection—Reagan, Ronald.

<sup>681</sup> Adriene Davis quoted in Trejos, "Group to Buy Reagan's California Ranch."

<sup>682</sup> Film promotion appears in the YAF's magazine article, "Foundation Premieres Inaugural Film, *Still Point in a Turning World: Ronald Reagan and His Ranch*," *Libertas*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Spring 2011): 21.

Reagan as holding firm to the past and alleged American “traditions” in the face of modernity and change. At the YAF’s hands-on Reagan Ranch Center museum in Santa Barbara, colourful stories about *Rancho del Cielo*’s history abound that perpetuate the current Republican take on Reagan’s image as the nation’s number one hero. In one such story we learn of the “Hanging Tree” on the ranch grounds where “frontier justice” was dispensed on stagecoach “bandits” and robbers: an apparent symbol of Reagan (and many current Republican’s) own desire for a more “traditional” style of law and order.<sup>683</sup> The Ranch Center is open to the public while the Ranch itself is accessible by invitation only through the Young America’s Foundation. As Jon Stewart might say, the Clintons and the Obamas should not be expecting an invitation anytime soon.

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<sup>683</sup> See the Young America Foundation’s “Reagan Ranch Center” website for a virtual tour at: < <http://www.yaf.org/VirtualTour.aspx> > (accessed 4 December 2015).



**Figure C.3:** Ronald Reagan's ranch created the frontier milieu for conservatism in the hills east of Malibu. Here the president poses for the press after signing his first tax cut bill at *Rancho del Cielo* on August 13, 1981. The table and chair are among those items now owned by the Reagan Ranch Center museum. (Courtesy Ronald Reagan Library, Photo #C3487-3A)

George W. Bush's Prairie Chapel Ranch near Crawford, Texas, is somewhat of an anomaly compared with TR's Elkhorn, the LBJ Ranch, and *Rancho del Cielo*—but then again, perhaps not. Bush acquired the 1,600 acre ranch in 1999, just prior to his first presidential run but at the close of his presidency the Bushes moved to Dallas. The ranch is still owned by George and Laura Bush and though it still features no horses it does, curiously, contain a great deal of green space, a geothermal heating system, and a rain-fed 42,000-gallon cistern used to irrigate the lawns. Such eco-friendly features would appear to run contrast to Bush's own pro-resource extraction, unfriendly

conservation policies during his presidency. As environmental historian William Cronon explains, though, that if Bush's private and public stances on the environment are at odds, the at-home-conservationist Bush is much more in keeping with the *pre*-Reagan tradition of the Republican Party. In his article "When the G.O.P. Was Green," Cronon points out that Republican opposition to environmental protection is only a recent development. Until the 1980s, the G.O.P. could claim to have had an environmental record just as distinguished as that of the Democratic Party. TR, a Republican himself, had launched conservation as the first national political movement. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge was created by Republicans—a fact that Cronon contends makes current Republicans insistence on drilling for oil there all the more distressing. At one time the two parties actually competed over which one cared for the environment more. But by 1980, the right flank of the party had begun levelling their sites at big government; and, since the Johnson years, environmental protection has become associated with federal regulation. Now demonized by Republicans as governmental interference of property rights, some westerners in the 1980s became increasingly hostile toward federal ownership of the land. As Cronon states, since Cowboy Reagan: "The party has turned its back on a proud history.... [the] older, Republican tradition [honors] our heritage by preserving public lands, remembering the deep spiritual ties to the land that led the United States to be the first nation in the world to create wilderness parks—what actions could be more conservative than these?"<sup>684</sup> In the twentieth century starting with Republican TR, the G.O.P., at least in this one regard, adhered to the more active government version of the Frontier Myth. But *The Hinge*, which included the election of Reagan, changed all that.

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<sup>684</sup> William Cronon, "When the G.O.P. Was Green," *New York Times*, January 8, 2001: A17



## The Hinge

The artist John Gast, historian Frederick Jackson Turner, novelist Owen Wister, and amateur historian, part-time cowboy and soon to be president Theodore Roosevelt were among the key individuals who together, had struck a responsive chord with the nation at the outset of the twentieth century with their mutually reinforcing articulations of the Frontier Myth. In a sense, they helped relegate the American West to a place of the mind (a frontier, an idea, a mythic country), rather than a geographic region. The Frontier Myth had been clearly established as a national myth, not a regional one.

As referenced throughout this study, Brian Dippie's seminal cultural history, *The Vanishing American*, demonstrated how myths (regardless of the extent to which they reflect social realities) can be extremely influential, that "ideas have consequences," and that studying powerful myths not only reveals popular societal attitudes but that these are actual *shapers* of attitudes and policies as well. As such they are key to our understanding of American history and culture. This has been evident throughout this study of the four frontier presidents. As Dippie had demonstrated through another American myth, these structures of thought which people have held in the past can be extremely influential—depending upon who believes them and acts upon them. Further, John Cawelti has contended in *Six Gun Mystique: The Sequel* that while the myths and symbols of the frontier American West maintain some general constants, it is also "an evolving and changing expression of different stages of American cultural history."<sup>685</sup> This intellectual foundation of Dippie and Cawelti has provided much of the theoretical

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<sup>685</sup> Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel*, 6.

basis for this study of the myth and the presidencies of Roosevelt, Johnson, Reagan, and Bush.

In keeping with the Frontier Myth's progressive features of the early twentieth century, Theodore Roosevelt had vigorously pursued an active federal government and a strong chief executive. In TR's view and that of many of his contemporaries, large corporations in particular had accumulated a great deal of power in American society for which they were in no way being held accountable. In other words, the wealthy now wielded a juggernaut of influence that they often deployed without any regard for its consequences in terms of poverty and injustice. For TR a balance of power, rather than an emphasis on individualism, could only be established with federal government intervention. In order to regulate business, promote leveling social or economic programs, redistribute income, and protect the nation's "green" spaces, TR and the progressive presidents who followed him believed that the federal government had to grow and that the president had a key role to play. The president's leadership was crucial to the process and lead to an expansion of his staff as well as his authority. Just as success in the hunt out in the wilderness often depended on teamwork, for Roosevelt "manly qualities" not only included tough individualism but just as importantly cooperation and camaraderie. During Roosevelt's tenure, a shift in race relations began to occur from a philosophy based on racial hierarchies to a more nationalistic "melting pot" approach. Roosevelt also moved away from his early 1890s emphasis on pining for a nostalgic past and toward a more forward looking vision for the twentieth century of the United States as a nation of limitless frontiers and possibilities. The Frontier Myth of the Roosevelt era likewise celebrated the triumph of national unity and community—as had recently been expressed in his literary work on *The Rough Riders* and in Owen

Wister's *The Virginian*. This vision reinforced the idea of the West as the "crucible for the idea of a modern unified nation held together by its parts."<sup>686</sup> Further, where the effete of "Old Europe" had failed (in building the Panama Canal, etc.), America would succeed replacing these old empires with a young, technologically advanced nation that would simultaneously promote the conservation and sustainability of its unique wilderness. Hand in hand this seeming dichotomy of celebrating the modern and pastoral would, according to TR, allow America's uniqueness and exceptionalism to be preserved in the long-term. This was a theme examined carefully by Leo Marx in *The Machine in the Garden* and explored in numerous Western and science fiction stories of the twentieth century. As president, Roosevelt defined his office as one focused on all Americans, rather than the elites, and later in his "Bull Moose" campaign TR laid the foundation for much of the liberal reformist agenda of subsequent decades. Theodore Roosevelt acted on his own belief and faith in the emerging liberal Frontier Myth and played a greater role in helping shape its early manifestations and some of its features than any other political leader.

During the 50 year period dating from Theodore Roosevelt's presidency, the myth established itself firmly in American literature and popular culture as *the* single most persuasive and pervasive interpretive framework for understanding not only America's past but its present concerns. The frontier/Western genre had dominated the film, novel and radio industry with thousands of manifestations and by the late 1950s was dominating TV as well (with 48 series running in 1959 alone).<sup>687</sup>

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<sup>686</sup> Rothman, *Devil's Bargains*, 33-35.

<sup>687</sup> Murdoch, *The American West*, 11.

In this milieu the next frontier president, Lyndon Johnson, attempted to bring the full Frontier Myth forward with his own progressive approach—infused with an intensity surpassing even that of TR’s. For almost two years, Johnson seemed an absolute success story: destroying his ultra-conservative opponent Barry Goldwater in the 1964 campaign and passing a plethora of progressive legislation on civil rights, anti-poverty, conservation, and numerous other liberal causes. As Paul Conkin writes: “No other president, before or since, achieved as many legislative goals or seemed as fully a master of the spectrum of tasks that go with such an almost monarchical office.”<sup>688</sup> Throughout this period, LBJ ran with what Ray Allen Billington had contended was the most prominent feature of the frontier thesis: optimism. Johnson and a majority of Americans had bought fully into and promoted the myth’s idea that “can do” Americans were winners who could accomplish anything and overcome the same kinds of great obstacles that their pioneering ancestors had. This belief created great expectations when applied to both domestic and foreign policies: the “War on Poverty,” the “Great Society,” echoes of Martin Luther King’s “*We Shall Overcome*”—all of which were part of his community bolstering, inclusive agenda. His guns *and* butter approach also included the hope and promise of victorious American troops coming home from Vietnam “with the coonskin on the wall.” Before long, however, this over-optimism proved a double-edged sword as a series of unforeseen events, including a quagmire in Vietnam, race riots, and other crises both at home and abroad, would cause the grip of the existing liberal Frontier Myth structure on the American people (along with Johnson’s own reputation) to weaken and then collapse.

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<sup>688</sup> Conkin, *Big Daddy from the Pedernales*, 173.

By the mid-point of Johnson's second term in office, the significance of the Western and Frontier Myth began undergoing drastic changes as a result of a growing movement to expose the longstanding myth for what the counter culture and anti-war protestors thought it was: a violent cultural tradition based on self-interest, avarice, and faux depictions of good versus evil. The frontier hero was no longer seen as an emancipating force based on the morality, honour or truth. Instead of upholding the noble values of a heroic Virginian, Shane or the Magnificent Seven, the cowboy/gunman in popular culture was now serving destructive ends. The traditional Western myths were a reflection of ideas that had moved off of the national stage. By the end of the explosive Sixties, the liberal, nationalist Frontier Myth that Johnson had so closely adhered to had become viewed increasingly as a dangerous mindset that no longer seemed to fit the nation's circumstances.

As anthropologist Marshall Sahlins has contended, a dynamic relationship exists between the structures of culture on one hand and historical events on the other. Sometimes events are so powerful that they transform a society's underlying social structures, and on other occasions the underlying structures of culture are so powerful that they subsume events (causing them to be interpreted within the existing confines of a culture). During periods such as the early years of the Johnson presidency, the Frontier Myth offered an explanation for everything that occurred in society. But during certain watershed periods, as in the late 1960s and the decade to follow, where events did not match up with the expectations of the myth, it forced the structure to change substantially, or at least forced it to have a different emphasis. Over a period of a dozen years, from 1968-1980, changes in the Frontier Myth's structure encompassed a near

complete swing of the pendulum from the left to the right of the American political spectrum.

During the 1970s, the longstanding liberal Frontier Myth initially went into hiatus as Republicans increasingly attacked liberalism as the source of America's problems. In the wake of LBJ, the right harangued against the dangers of federal power. Government regulation of business had allegedly torn the nation's fabric of freedom apart, including individual rights. Conservatives argued that progressive presidents and their administrations had created false issues in order to inflate the powers and status of government and of themselves, and that they had botched their mission to spread liberty abroad. This was not without considerable irony. As John Morton Blum contends: "The rightists were the prisoners of a stroboscopic nostalgia for a time that had never been."<sup>689</sup> Arguably, neither the national government nor the chief executives themselves were the ones who had created the problems they were attempting to solve. But the power of major events to effect changes to the structure and emphases of even the most powerful of myths—just as Sahlins had contended—would soon prove clearly evident.

Given that in the post-World War II period, the Frontier Myth and related Cold War rhetoric of America's duties in the world had become deeply woven into Americans' thinking about their nation's identity and purpose, it would be difficult to blame Johnson or most of his speech-writers too much for not seeing where the frontier rhetoric was ultimately leading them. Initially, most Americans had bought fully into the idea that their nation had a duty to extend its superior civilization throughout the world, to "go west" as the pioneers had done. During the first two decades of the Cold War, the

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<sup>689</sup> Blum, *The Progressive Presidents*, 206.

Western seemed to embody the psychology of the East-West struggle and had offered clear answers to complex questions and a paradigm of dedication to purpose. But in the context of Southeast Asia, the counter culture, assassinations, and race riots, the American experience was something altogether different than was depicted and believed to have been experienced on the frontier. The guidance of the myth no longer provided the answers needed to deal with the complex events that confronted and confounded an American nation that seemed to be on the verge of a nervous breakdown. With forces spiraling out of control by 1968, Johnson came to personify the perceived failures of frontier liberalism in the 1960s.

From the late 1960s through 1980, a shift took place, *the hinge* from LBJ to Ronald Reagan. Within the parameters of American political culture, the Democratic president Johnson and Republican Reagan came down at diametrically opposite poles: one called for more government intervention, the other called for much less – both relied heavily on the Frontier Myth for success. Turner had argued that the two greatest products of the frontier: tolerance, diversity and politically democratic communities on the one hand and the construction of the libertarian individual on the other, are in ongoing conflict with one another. Johnson's platform of 1964 chose to emphasize tolerance and a national agenda based on equality as opposed to regional policies and values; Reagan in 1980 then moved the emphasis to the other side of the spectrum and toward the kind libertarian individualism and states' rights that Barry Goldwater had previously envisioned but had pursued with much less success. LBJ, like TR, projected frontier imagery forward in time to a progressive future while Reagan projected it backwards and looked to a nostalgic past. A dichotomy developed here and with it the discourse and the myth, or at very least its emphasis, shifted and changed. By the 1980 presidential

campaign, national politics and most popular culture versions of the Western—from films to novels to TV programs— were well on their way to becoming a narrower, less inclusive, conservative voice. President Johnson’s attempts to bring the full liberal Frontier Myth to fruition had sputtered, then collapsed; the Western myth receded into the background in the 1970s; and by the time Reagan had entered the White House in 1981, a reactionary, nostalgic way of understanding America had replaced the more future oriented, progressive vision. Reagan’s frontier America is a reasserted structure that looked backward in time to the past to create a contention that the myth had been reinvigorated by returning to what it originally was, or was supposed to have been. The emergence of Reagan as a presidential icon can best be understood not simply as a resurgence of American conservatism—the usual explanation provided by scholars—but as this dissertation has demonstrated, in the context of a restructured and redirected version of the Frontier Myth in response to domestic and international events.

As both candidate and president, Reagan was a kind of nineteenth century man who communicated in simple terms through uplifting, patriotic and often fictional Western stories, metaphors and references to Hollywood movies, to overturn LBJ’s vision of the country. Reagan did so through: the unlikely combination of “rugged” individualism and law and order, an emphasis on defense rather than domestic spending, taking a hardline against the Soviets, prioritizing libertarianism and property rights over Civil Rights and inclusion, and, at least in terms of rhetoric, reducing both the size and role of the federal government in America. The failures of the economy and belief that America was losing its world leader status abroad—having failed to win in Vietnam, permitted the Soviets to run amok in Afghanistan, and allowed Iranian students to humiliate the United States—were all said to be the fault of those who did



not understand the true lessons of the frontier experience. For Reaganite Republicans the biggest culprits behind the debacle were identified as the big-spending liberal cowman LBJ (who in their eyes had failed the frontier test) and his weak-kneed, peanut farmer accomplice Jimmy Carter. Reaganites saw their own conservative President's connections to the frontier western story as powerful symbolism, the undercurrent of which implied that to oppose Reaganism was somehow to be against "Americanism" itself. During his Presidency and afterwards, even many who were not in agreement with his policies admired Reagan himself and his direct connections with the conservative Frontier Myth.

Today the popular idea that frontier American leaders and politicians are naturally Republicans with conservative ideals flows directly from the Reagan era. The watershed events of the mid-Sixties through the late Seventies broke up the consensus of a liberal, progressive Frontier Myth that no longer appeared to match the historic experience: the very same process articulated by Marshall Sahlin. Instead the liberal frontier model was replaced with a conservative version and its combination of nostalgia, sense of American exceptionalism, exclusion of non-*bona fide* Americans, and both optimism and resentment. In the twenty-first century, however, the power of the conservative Frontier Myth lost a significant degree of its power and acceptance during the controversial presidency of George W. Bush.

From Bush's "amphitheatre" on his horse-less Prairie Chapel ranch to his "dead or alive" and "mission accomplished" rhetoric, the President from Crawford (via Kennebunkport) came to be viewed by the end of his time in office as the most contrived and self-conscious of the Cowboy Presidents. But more significantly for the purposes of this study, Bush 43, as with LBJ, is a clear example of a President working to expand the

parameters of the Frontier Myth in response to broader international and domestic events but ultimately being overtaken by events in the process. In response to 9/11 and troubles at home, George W. Bush took Reagan's frontier structure and added different and sometimes contradictory emphases. Bush's unilateralist approach to the international community in Iraq and on the environment, nuclear arms treaties, and international justice, saw him go further than any other US president of recent times to put what he viewed as national interests ahead of the global community. But when the American effort in the Middle East began to sour with no end in sight, the economy went into decline, and Hurricane Katrina caused devastation at home as the federal government struggled to respond, many Americans were left the impression that the President had let go of the reigns of competent government. This combination of events in Bush's second term brought on serious criticism of his Administration, especially on the left and middle of the political spectrum. If conservatives generally continued to support his forceful, unilateral action abroad, other Americans saw this as a failure of an unchecked president whose reckless cowboy approach to governing had taken the myth to extremes and undermined the myth's viability in the process. By the last half of the Bush presidency, in particular, more and more Americans put further distance between themselves and what had now become accepted as the conservative incarnation of the Frontier Myth. For millions, the Bush era version of the frontier experience as it applied to government policy came to be seen as out of step with the world in the twenty-first century. For some non-conservatives, Bush 43's approach amounted to a betrayal of the earlier frontier mythology of liberal cowboy presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Lyndon Baines Johnson.

Related to this negative response to Bush from those on the left and many in the center, Republicans in recent times have had a kind of schizophrenic response to Theodore Roosevelt. The conservative *National Review* continues to praise TR for his “robust interventionism and unstinting defense of American patriotism and self-government” but remains clearly wary of Roosevelt on other issues. “TR’s progressivism,” its editors complain, had a “direct line” to regulation, modern liberalism and “big, intrusive government.” Roosevelt’s advocacy of a graduated income tax and tendency to equate great wealth with “selfishness” also bothers the *Review* which concludes that what America now needs is not a TR “but a McKinley, someone with the sense to stand back...and let the creativity and imagination of Americans do its work.”<sup>690</sup> To be certain, Roosevelt’s presidency framed questions that Americans still ask today. How much influence should the Federal government have over the US economy? What needs to be done to protect the environment for future generations? And how much of its military and economic power should the United States exert globally? And specific aspects of TR’s presidential and “Bull Moose” agenda have been raised regularly by the current Democrat President Barack Obama. On March 8, 2010, while promoting the health care bill that would ultimately signed into law two weeks later, Obama invoked his Republican predecessor TR asking Americans to: “Think about it. We’ve been talking about healthcare for nearly a century. I’m reading a biography of Teddy Roosevelt right now. He was talking about it. Teddy Roosevelt.”<sup>691</sup>

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<sup>690</sup> Richard Lowry, “TR and His Fan: Roosevelt and McCain, for Good and Ill,” *National Review*, February 7, 2000: 32.

<sup>691</sup> Daniel M. Fox and Howard Markel. “Is History Relevant to Implementing Health Reform?” *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA), Vol. 303, No. 17 (May 5, 2010): 1749-50.



***Figure C.4: Though not opposed to “putting on the hat,” as were some other non-Frontier Presidents such as JFK, Barack Obama has rarely employed frontier imagery during his Presidency. Here Senator Obama obliges supporters at a presidential campaign rally in Austin, Texas. (Photographer: Benjamin Sklar, February 23, 2007. © Ben Sklar Photography)***

On the international front, political scientist David Lake contends that conservatives today are much more likely than liberals to believe that American ideals and culture are superior to those of other nations in the world: an issue which may have direct implications for the nature and future role of the Frontier Myth. A 2011 Pew

Research Center poll found that 63% of Americans who regarded themselves as conservatives believed that American culture is superior to others as compared to just 34% for liberals. Professor Lake explains that conservatives expect other countries to recognize the inherent goodness of the American people and the foreign policies produced by the US government, and to accept America's international leadership because of its self-evident virtue. "Indeed," writes Lake, "many conservatives call for a foreign policy that is free of constraints by the United Nations or other multilateral institutions precisely because they believe accommodating the desires of other countries would limit our ability to act on our goodness." As a result conservatives are typically the most adamant proponents of an assertive unilateralism in which the American government should be trusted by other countries. Liberals meanwhile see the United States as exceptional because of its system of limited government and checks and balances. Because of these safeguards, Lake explains, those on the left tend to be more secure in allowing government to play a larger role in Americans' lives. In this view, the US should welcome limits to its freedom of action abroad in the same way that it does this with domestic issues at home. Also in keeping with these attitudes, the same Pew Research poll found that while 57% of liberals believe that the United States should obtain United Nations approval before taking military action, only 38% of conservatives see this as an important step. Lake observes that: "It is striking that the most avid proponents of an assertive unilateralism in which other countries are expected to trust us—and our government—simply because we are good are the same conservatives who so distrust government at home." Since the late 1970s, the conservative Frontier Myth paradigm in politics and popular culture has portrayed government as the problem that interfered in Americans efforts for success and justice both at home and abroad. How

the US government could be the problem at home and a beacon of flawless policy and goodness elsewhere, however, is never explained. For Lake, American exceptionalism—a key element of the Frontier Myth—has become “a conservative trope” used to question the nationalism and patriotism of liberals. But as he asserts, in the end, the inherent contradiction in the conservative myth’s philosophy of exceptionalism is perhaps what is most “exceptional” of all.<sup>692</sup>

### **The Future of the Frontier Myth in Presidential Politics**

The Frontier Myth is resilient. It has been embraced in popular culture and politics for more than a century as a comforting narrative of American society and purpose. Most significantly, this study finds that this set of ideas in American mythology has held tremendous power at the level of presidential politics. Roosevelt, Johnson, Reagan, Bush 43, and to varying degrees presidents with non-Cowboy identities have tapped into the frontier of the imagination for more than a century—with its limitless possibilities, claims of a unique relationship between Americans and the natural world, ideas about the expansion of American values in faraway places, the exceptionalism of the American character and its institutions, struggle of civilization versus savagery, and promise of a bonanza just over the horizon. Liberal and conservative presidents have engaged the tensions inherent within the changing Frontier Myth across a broad spectrum: the pull between old and new, between nostalgia and progress; and the demands for individualism versus needs of the community and of tolerance and inclusiveness. All of these tropes, whether conservative or liberal in their emphasis,

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<sup>692</sup> All Pew Research Poll results and quotations appear in: David Lake, “Is America Exceptional? Liberals, Conservatives Agree—and Disagree,” *CNN.com*, December 2, 2011 <http://www.cnn.com/2011/12/02/opinion/lake-america-exceptional/> (accessed 12 December 2011).

served to strengthen the hopes of presidents and presidential campaigns by situating them and their policies in the same company as the nation's heroic pioneers and its great mission.

Careful and thorough attempts to debunk the Frontier Myth have been with us since the days of Charles Beard in the 1920s and Earl Pomeroy in the 1950s but have been limited in their influence on the general public and on most American Presidents. Perhaps this is in part because, as David H. Murdoch contends, “the ultimate defence of all myth is to argue that it is true—if not literally, then in some transcendental sense.”<sup>693</sup> The myth of the frontier experience remains the most powerful set of American ideas to emerge since the Civil War that directly engages with the nation's society and character. And the Western genre has undergone dramatic changes in its emphasis and style over the last century. But the frontier symbolism and Western story continues to hold a special appeal to many Americans who, in our post-postmodern world still want to experience it through art, films, novels, TV shows, advertising or in trips to places like Tombstone, Arizona or Deadwood, South Dakota. So pervasive are those ideas that the frontier themes these forms of media perpetuate have the potential to remain influential in American culture and politics a century from now.

As this study demonstrates, the power of ideas to shape policy as articulated by historian Brian Dippie, and the power of events to shape the structure of these ideas as contended by anthropologist Marshall Sahlins—is of great relevance to our understanding of the role of the Frontier Myth in presidential politics, policy and personas since the beginning of the twentieth century.

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<sup>693</sup> Murdoch, *The American West*, 119.

Looking forward, the nature of the Frontier Myth's message in the realm of presidential politics depends on the shape and influence of national and world events that will occur in the years and decades to come. Brian Dippie, John Cawelti and Marshall Sahlins remind us that myths do not stay static for all time—that even with the most powerful myths some features of them endure, others do not, and that major events can cause myths to dramatically change their nature and/or trajectory. Just as the changing nature of the myth allowed conservative Presidents Reagan and Bush 43 to capture the symbolism of the Frontier Myth from liberal Presidents Roosevelt and Johnson, another shakeup in the contours and emphasis myth could someday swing perceived “ownership” back to those on the left of the political spectrum. In the current firestorm of world events involving intense and multinational conflicts in the Middle East, the mass movement of refugees, fear of terror attacks at home, economic uncertainty, enduring racial tensions on America's streets, highly publicized domestic gun violence, hostility on the part of *bona fide* Americans toward immigration, and polarization in American politics to the point of non-communication—the nature of the Frontier Myth could once again be entering a watershed period. The myth has often played a significant role in putting the majority of Americans on the same page, as during the early Cold War, but at the other extreme has contributed to a division of the left from the right and an intensification in the polarization of American politics—as has arguably been the case in recent years. In the end, it is the events that are in large part outside of the American Commander-in-Chief's control which may prove most crucial in determining the nature, shape and acceptability of the Frontier Myth in American culture and politics along with its role in presidential politics in the decades to come. That the myth has endured to this day, more than a century after the first Frontier



President left office, is a testament to its ability to adapt and change while holding a constant grip on the American imagination.

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